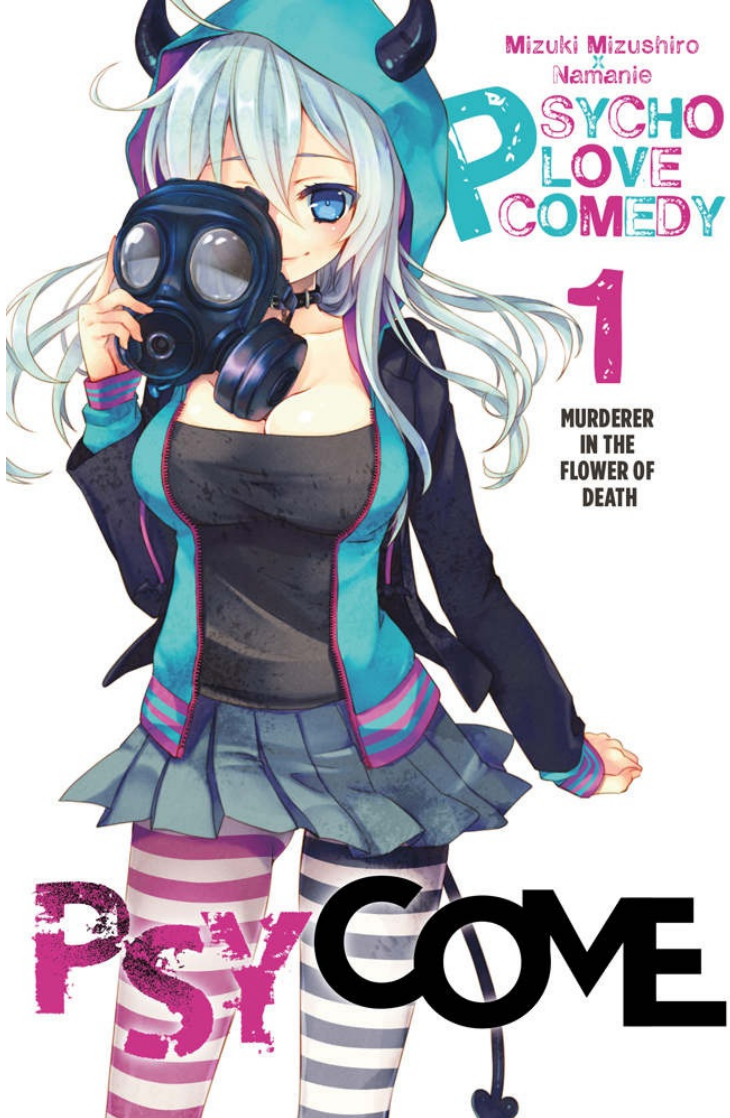

Mizuki Mizushiro
x
Namanie

# PSYCHO LOVE COMEDY

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MURDERER IN THE FLOWER OF DEATH

PSYCOME

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MURDERER IN THE
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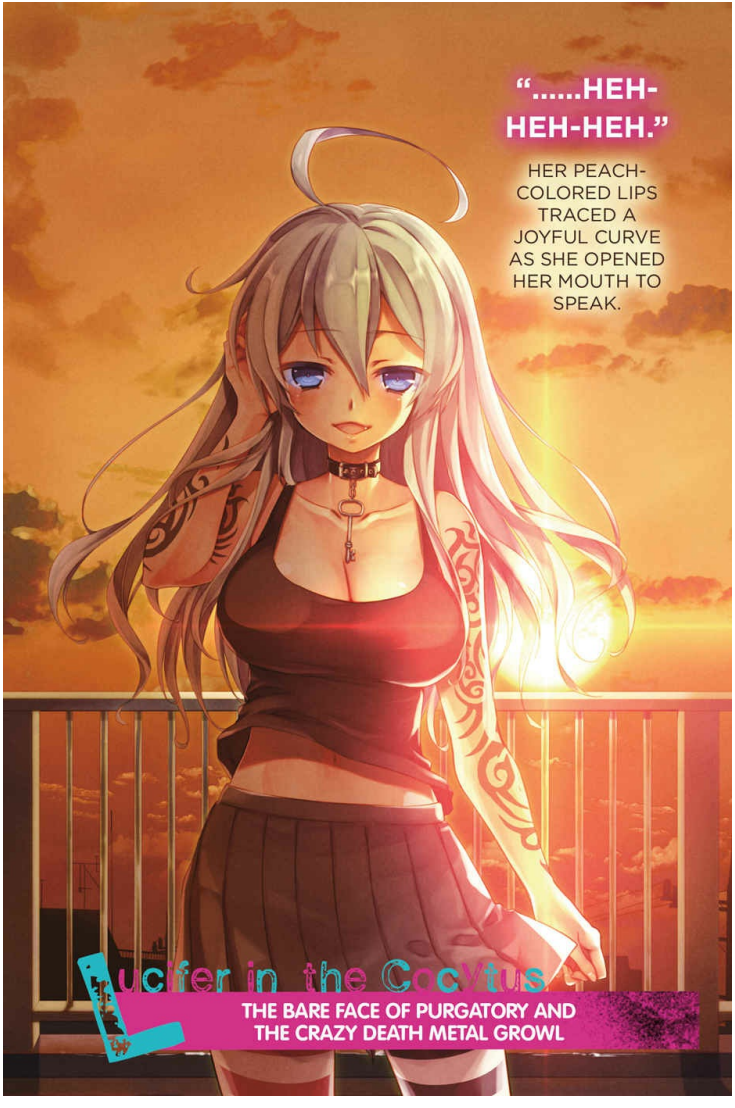
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# PSYCOME

## 1

## MURDERER IN THE FLOWER OF DEATH

Mizuki Mizushiro
x
Namanie

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Bing, bong…

Bang, bong…

A hoarse chime rang out from the warped speaker like a death rattle. At the sound, Kyousuke lifted his face from his desk and opened his eyes.

"……"

For one merciful instant, he couldn't recall where he was, and then, in the blink of an eye, the memory crashed down on him, and his body filled with weariness and despair.

Scratching his head through his tousled black hair, Kyousuke surveyed his dismal surroundings and sighed. *Why did I get stuck at a school like this?* The unpainted concrete walls boxing him in on all sides were spiderwebbed with chips and cracks, and as if that wasn't enough, vulgar graffiti was scribbled over nearly every inch of their surface.

"FUCK," "I'll kill ya!" "Die die die die Kill kill kill kill," "One bad bitch + another bad bitch = kill everybody," "SCHOOL KILLER," "I wanna XXX that cutie Kurumiya," "← if you wanna get your shit wrecked," "← Too late!" and so on. "I wish the world would become a peaceful pla—" appeared to have been written on one surface in blood before being abruptly cut off. The "artists" were as enthusiastic as they were obscene, and the gaudily colored text scrawled its way across the walls, the desks, the chairs, and even the ceiling.

However, what struck Kyousuke as the most strange and repulsive was not the crumbling state of the concrete walls, or the crude graffiti that covered them, or even the thick iron bars fitted to every narrow window. No, the weirdest, scariest, most odious part, Kyousuke thought, was his classmates.

The most *pressing* example of which was the male student sitting to the right of Kyousuke in the middle of the front row. "Huh? What the hell're you lookin' at?" he growled from beneath a Mohawk dyed a deep shade of crimson. Kyousuke couldn't help but notice the ropy muscles peeking out from beneath the boy's loosened striped necktie and torn dress shirt. "I'm the kinda guy who likes to take out trash like you!"

All of a sudden the Mohawked youth had him by the collar, and Kyousuke could see that a number of the many piercings covering the larger boy's face swayed and rattled when he talked. *He certainly has a youthful vigor*, Kyousuke thought to himself. *Not exactly the kind of guy you want to get involved with, but then he's just the type that's impossible to ignore.* Sweating profusely, Kyousuke did his best to force a smile.

"Ha-ha… Well, it's nothing? It's just…you really have quite the striking look!" Kyousuke stammered. "Your…um…fashion sense, it's so…turn of the century? Especially that

hairstyle! Makes you look just like a rooster! Perfect for a cock like you, really! …Ha-ha-ha! So…how about letting me go?"

"What the hell?! I'll fuckin' kill you!!"

Any attempt by Kyousuke to talk it out was smashed to pieces by that reaction. With a high-pitched war cry, a muscle-bound arm lifted Kyousuke's body into the air, bringing him face-to-highly-pierced-face with the larger boy, whose eyes bulged with rage, and for a moment, it looked as though Kyousuke would find himself hooked to a slab of meat and metal jewelry.

He didn't so much as flinch. "…Ah, sorry. It's my bad, so let's just calm down, yeah?" Kyousuke's smile had disappeared, and he stared down the older boy, point-blank. "You see, I got all worked up from being thrown into this shithole against my will"—with a sharp crack, Kyousuke smashed his forehead into the face of his startled opponent—"so you outta know that if you start something, I'm gonna finish it, you Mohawked bastard!"

The rest of the class, most of whom had been looking on with a kind of hungry anticipation, burst into an uproar, eager to see one or the other participant (and probably expecting it to be Kyousuke) end up on a stretcher—or in a body bag. The only thing connecting this bloodthirsty crowd to a group of normal students in their proper school uniforms was their age.

"All right, everyone, let's watch 'im die!" To Mohawk's credit, he'd already recovered from Kyousuke's sudden head-butt and seemed to want to put on a bit of grandstanding for

his peers. “But since I was just getting bored, how about we make it good, eh?” Most of the other students were practically drooling at the promise of a violent spectacle.

“Such a pain…new school, new batch of hot-blooded assholes to deal with.” Kyousuke could feel his fingers twitch in involuntary anticipation. “You *sure* you don’t wanna let this one go, Cock-head?”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh!” Mohawk, it turned out, did not want to let this one go. “I’m gonna pull out yer nails with pliers, one by one…then yer fingers, one by one…”

Among the hungry crowd, few faces stood out. There was the boy muttering nonsense to himself, as though reciting some kind of poem or prayer or mantra. There was the timid, mousy-looking girl rushing around in a dizzy panic, stammering, “H-h-h-how awful! S-s-s-someone, a-a-a-anyone! Stop him!” And then there was the older girl leisurely painting her fingernails, stifling a yawn as she ignored her surroundings.

The more Kyousuke looked, the less the crowd seemed to fit together, to make sense. But he knew. Forced into this wretched school, crammed into this crappy classroom…Kyousuke knew, without a doubt, that there was not a single decent one among them.

*But what does that say about you?* asked a small voice in the back of his mind. Kyousuke scowled. *No, I’m nothing like them.* Looking out over his classmates’ faces, he felt nothing but disgust swell up from the deepest reaches of his heart. And he knew that they deserved it.

“Fine, then, Cock-head! Let’s go! I’ll do a little surgery on that ugly face…with my fists.”

“Wha—?! I’ve had it with you, asshole!” Still holding Kyousuke’s lapel with his left hand, Mohawk brandished his right arm menacingly. “I’m gonna kill ya!” His rugged fist, a

tight ball of muscle, pulled back and—

*Rattle rattle rattle…wham!*

At that exact moment, the door at the front of the classroom slammed open to reveal a lone girl standing on the threshold. Judging by the name-brand suit and bundle of papers under her arm, the girl was a teacher, though she certainly looked too young for the part.

"Heya, jackasses! Whatcha up to, hmm? You want me to discipline you all at once?" Scowling at the motley group of students, each of whom found themselves frozen in place, was a sweet young girl with bobbed hair and a voice of authority. She couldn't have been more than four and a half feet tall, and if you'd replaced the suit and papers with a child's dress and backpack, she would have been the perfect picture of an elementary schooler.

A moment of stunned silence fell over the class. It didn't last long.

"Pfh. Discipline us? This little miss?" Mohawk had taken his hands off of Kyousuke and was now pointing at the girl standing in the doorway, laughing and holding his stomach. "Oh, wooooooow—Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The girl's eyebrow twitched in irritation, but she kept an otherwise calm demeanor and approached the battered lectern at the front of the classroom, depositing her stack of documents with a slight stretch and a grunt. "Weeeellllll, since it is the first day and all, why don't we overlook it this one little time, okay?" Her fingers brushed the ends of her bobbed hair unconsciously, as if they were bothering her. "Now, before I go and change my mind, why don't you cut the laughter, hmm? Or else it'll be straight to discipline, no delay. I will

absolutely not forgive back talk."

Mohawk licked his lips in cruel anticipation. "Well, isn't this interesting?" With both hands, he grasped the back of a nearby chair. "Let's do this!" In a split second, Mohawk had hoisted the chair overhead, trampled the desk with a leap, and rushed at the girl. There was no hesitation or indecision. No moderation or mercy at all. "Don'cha scream and cry, little miss! Hyeaaaaah!" The chair swung downward, directly at the top of the small girl's head, and it seemed her fragile skull would be crushed under the blow.

"Hmph. You idiot…the one who's going to scream and cry…is you! *Time to die!*" Out of nowhere, an iron pipe swung toward the bridge of Mohawk's glittering, pierced nose.

The *crunch* of the blow was audible. Fresh blood, dark and ruby red, sprayed from Mohawk's face, soiling the girl's soft, pale cheek. He let out a dull cry and then crumpled, chair clattering to the floor beside him.

"Good grief. Seems you don't know your manners at all, jackass… Don't worry, though! I'll teach you plenty, starting right now!" The girl's mouth was pulled back into a sadistic smile. "And what will I teach you? Why, fear and loyalty, of course! Now, you might die in the process…but surely you don't mind? Right? Right?"

As small as she had seemed standing in the doorway, the girl appeared to tower over Mohawk now. "…Heya, jackass! How about an answer?" Mohawk only groaned and writhed on the floor, clutching his smashed face. "C'mon, let's hear it!" The girl brandished the iron pipe above her head. "And your answer is?"

The dingy tile floor seemed to drop out from under Kyousuke's feet, and he fell to his knees. *What is this…? Who are these people? Why is the teacher like, like, like this…?*

From his lowered position, several desks and chairs blocked Kyousuke's view to the front of the room, so that he could just barely see the bloodstained pipe rise and fall again and again, accompanied by thick, wet crunching noises, scattered cries of "St-stop—" and "Can this be?!" and "My eyes! My eeeeeeyes!" and great crimson plumes of blood that painted the girl and the wall behind her.

After several agonizing moments, there was a final dull thud, and then everything was still. "……Hmm? Looks like he already passed out! Or maybe he's dead? Eh, whichever's fine." Speckled with blood and grease and shouldering the now bent iron pipe, the girl returned to the lectern. "Hey, you! How long do you plan on lying there? Do I hafta teach you your manners, too?"

Kyousuke snapped back to his senses to find a pair of big, round, charming eyes, glittering with adrenaline, looking down at him. "…Wha—?!" He scrambled to his feet, clawing at the back of his chair for support, feeling that if he didn't get up right then, he would absolutely die. It was only after he had frantically slid into his seat that Kyousuke remembered to breathe.

"Heya, jackass, how about an answer, hmmm?" The pipe, still covered in carnage, twitched in the girl's hand. "And your answer is?"

"Y-yeeeeees!!" he answered weakly.

The girl's tongue darted out, lapping a bit of blood from her soiled cheek. "…Yes? I see." She was smiling, a wide, jagged expression. "So you really want to be punished that badly?"

It was all too absurd. Kyousuke frantically looked left, then right in desperation. "N-no,

that's not it! I meant that I will follow you obediently, teacher! It was a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding!" With his mind's eye, he placed a mosaic over the ocean of blood, the broken shape at its center, and the human figures scattered about it, shutting them all out of his consciousness behind a mental filter.

The girl snorted, almost childlike. "Hmph…well, I *am* feeling magnanimous today. Now, that feeling that you have toward me? That's fear, mmmkay? And it'd be an awfully good idea to remember it veeery well. Heh-heh-heh…I wonder if the rest of you have learned?" She turned to the rest of the class. "At this institution, when you bite back at me, it always, without exception, turns out *like this*! If you value your lives, don't oppose me! Obey me! Flatter me! Get on your knees! You filthy pig bastards!"

Her small voice was thunder in the silent, bloodstained classroom, and with a flick of the wrist, she brought the iron pipe up and then down again, showering nearby students in slick gore. "Any questions?"

In the midst of this nightmare tableau, where anyone sane would have curled silently into a fetal ball, the older girl to Kyousuke's left spoke a bored "No, ma'am" and continued applying tiny rhinestones and Swarovski crystals to her vermilion nails.

Aside from her, all were silent; even the atmosphere of the room had been beaten to death.

"Well, then," the teacher continued, unfazed. "I think a little self-introduction is overdue. My name is Hijiri Kurumiya. Starting today, I'll be your homeroom teacher for the year. My favorite words are *submission* and *domination*. My least favorite words are *brat* and *pip-*

*squeak*. I may look young…," and she fiddled again with the ends of her bobbed hair, "but I'm in the bloom of my twenties. *Nice to meet you.*"

It was not, in fact, nice to meet her, but nobody was stupid or suicidal enough to say so. Satisfied with the mute response of the class, Kurumiya continued, "Okay! Now, I know just now there was some idiot laughing…" Nobody dared look toward Mohawk's crumpled, broken remains. "…so I waaas planning to thoroughly break you all in, but…wouldn't that be unfriendly? Heh-heh…it might not be as satisfying, but for now I guess I'll give you passing marks."

As she spoke, Kurumiya slowly surveyed the classroom, scrutinizing each student's face in turn. After she had stared into Kyousuke's trembling eyes for what seemed like an eternity but was probably closer to ten or twelve seconds, she suddenly relaxed, her cruel excuse for a grin gave way to a beaming smile, and in a singsong voice she recited a refrain like a requiem.

"Welcome to Purgatorium Remedial Academy—you murderers!"

# Sludge over Ground

## GOOD-BYE NORMAL, HELLO ABNORMAL

FIRST PERIOD

**Q.** WHAT IS THE PURGATORIUM REMEDIAL ACADEMY?

**A.** IT IS A PLACE TO TAKE UNDERAGE CRIMINALS—BOYS AND GIRLS NOT YET TWENTY YEARS OF AGE WHO HAVE COMMITTED MURDER—AND MAKE THEM RESPECTABLE FOR THEIR RETURN TO SOCIETY, A *RE*-EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE. OUR MISSION IS TO BEAT THE WARPED NATURE OF A MURDERER INTO SHAPE, TO CORRECT IT AND REFORM IT INTO SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL. THE INSTRUCTORS ARE ALSO SELECTED FOR BEING PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY TOUGH INDIVIDUALS. YOU KNOW, LIKE ME, HEH-HEH-HEH...

# Sludge over Ground

## GOOD-BYE NORMAL, HELLO ABNORMAL

## FIRST PERIOD

Kyousuke Kamiya was a totally normal boy. He looked normal and dressed normally, got normal grades, had normal motor reflexes. His totally normal hobbies included music appreciation and games. He had normal plans to graduate from the local middle school in half a year, and his academic aspirations were completely unremarkable: His sights were set on the nearby central public high school. And it was this completely normal fifteen-year-old student who…

"…"

…had found himself in an old storehouse that was halfway to being a mausoleum.

Kyousuke, whose bed head–tousled hair was as black as his hoodie, jammed both hands into his pants pockets and silently took stock of his surroundings with tense eyes and a severe expression. One, two, three, four…there must have been twelve in total. Hooligans, street rats, and delinquent youths in flashy clothes surrounded Kyousuke, brandishing a nasty assortment of metal bats, crowbars, chains, and hefty bits of lumber.

One of them, a youth sporting a pompadour and wearing an embroidered satin jacket,

scowled at him. "So, yer the Kyousuke Kamiya we've heard rumors about, eh, 'Slayer'? Or is it 'Megadeath,' huh?"

"…No, that's not it at all. I'm just a normal Kyousuke Kamiya."

"Normal?! You said you're normal?! Hah!" Pompadour laughed through his nose. "Save the sleep talking for when you're actually asleep!"

The rest of the hoodlums joined in with shouts of "That's right!" and "Tell 'im!" Kyousuke silenced the lot of them with a long, slow glare, a grimace so full of icy menace that even the bravest among them were left struggling not to tremble. A couple of the less courageous looked to be fighting back tears.

They seemed unreasonably terrified. Pompadour raised his voice in strained bravado. "Y-y-you assholes! Wh-what're you so scared of?! He's just one guy! …Even if it is Kamiya, from the Sonic Syndicate, with all of us here, we can—"

"Sonic Syndicate?" Kyousuke retorted. "You mean *that other gang I crushed a while back*? Don't lump me in with those assholes, you idiot!" Almost lazily, Kyousuke swung a careless fist, catching Pompadour just below the shoulder.

"Gyaaaaaah! My arm!" Pompadour roared, clutching the place where Kyousuke's blow had landed. "My aaaaaarm!" He dropped to the floor, rolling around on the dingy asphalt and screaming.

Kyousuke glanced down. "Hey, would ya look at that…? It came right out." Dumbass was definitely playing it up, having a real time of it, too. *Like it could even be that bad. I barely touched him!* Unfortunately, not everyone agreed.

"Mobuuuuuu!! Wha…? Of all the—! He took down Mobu with one hit?!"

“H-his arm is just barely…what power! Is this guy really human?!”

“Hey, you idiots, pile on him all at once! He’s Mobu’s rival. Beat him up, kill ’im!”

The rest of the thugs, turning away from Pompadour’s cheap pity-party, seethed with anger, thirsty for blood-soaked revenge. They were quite a happy bunch.

“…Tch, what a pain,” Kyousuke snorted. “And here I didn’t want to have to get too violent, but what can you do?” Pompadour continued to moan and sob on the floor as Kyousuke began stretching each muscle in turn. “I guess we’ve gotten this far… Nothing to be done, eh?” He warmed up his legs with deep lunges. “But if we’re going to do this, I hope you don’t mind if I go all out?” Back, shoulders, neck…while rolling them around in order, he took in a view of the hoodlums surrounding him.

There were seven with weapons in hand and four more brandishing clenched fists, while he was alone and unarmed…hardly a fair matchup. Not that he minded such overwhelming odds; it just meant that he’d be able to finish this quickly.

As Kyousuke leisurely finished his warm-up exercises, he began to chuckle. “…Well, what’s the hold up? Come at me! I’ll take you all on at once!”

X X X

“Really, big brother?! You said you were just going out for a run, but you were fighting again, weren’t you? You know I can tell… Are we going to have to ban you from leaving the house?”

“…Sorry, Ayaka.” Kyousuke hung his head dejectedly. Standing in the entryway of his

home, he realized that he must look like a mess. Face covered in scratches and bruises, once-black jersey now pale with dust and grime… Of course she was mad at him, coming in looking like this. "But they were the ones who picked a fight in the first place! They were hanging out in front of the convenience store, and I tried to ignore them, I swear, but then they started in with the whole 'Hey, how about lending me some money?' bit, and then—"

"Don't make excuses to me, of all people!" Metal ladle met bruised forehead with a dull *thunk!* and Kyousuke quickly shut up. Ayaka Kamiya, Kyousuke's little sister and the one thing he truly valued in the world, stared up at him, hands on hips, smooth cheeks puffed out in frustration, eyes full of accusation. Thirteen years old this year, she wore her pigtails tied in purple-checkered ribbons and sported a matching apron. "Really…I was so worried about you, you know? That convenience store is less than five minutes' walk away, and you were gone almost an hour! I thought you were over all that fighting, but here we are…"

She gazed up at him with tearful eyes, and Kyousuke grew flustered. "M-my bad…I'm sorry! Really I am! I'll act better from now on, so…"

"Uh-huh. You said that last time, remember? When you burst in alone on that huge biker gang meet. Big brother, how much will you make me worry before you're satisfied? No matter how tough you think you are, if you keep getting into these crazy fights…someday you're going to get in over your head, and you won't be coming back here for me to scold! Don't you understand?!"

Her unusually firm tone struck a soft spot in Kyousuke's heart. "I'm sorry, Ayaka. Really, I am." His apology was genuine this time, and he cast his eyes down at the floor. "From now on, I'll be careful, I promise."

Ayaka sighed. “Well, it’s fine. At least you came home in one piece…even if your whole body is covered in cuts.” Her tone was gentle, and when Kyousuke lifted his gaze to meet hers, Ayaka was smiling sweetly.

Suddenly embarrassed, Kyousuke unconsciously turned to look away. “Nah, they’re just scratches. Rub a little spit on ’em and they’ll be fine.”

“Oh, really? Then, I guess I should—”

*Lick.*

“Wha—?! What the hell, Ayaka? J-just licking my cheek out of nowhere…?!”

“If I rub some spit on it, it’ll heal, right? And what’s with the surprise? How adorable!”

“…Shut up.”

Kyousuke put his hand to the cheek she had licked, looking at her with reproachful eyes. But that glinting look that shook up the hooligans was completely wasted on an opponent like his little sister.

Ayaka returned a mischievous wink, and stuck her pink tongue out at him, saying, “By the by, big brother. You have to properly sterilize your cuts, you know? And wash your clothes… Ah, do you want to get in the bath first? And then dinner? …A-and then, some Ay—”

“Don’t say it!! —‘Some Ayaka’? If that’s what you’re about to say, I don’t want to hear anything about it!!”

“Eh? What are you saying, big brother? I was gonna say, ‘Have some *ice cream*.’ Do you really want to make out with your sister that much? Heh-heh.”

After dramatically tilting her head, Ayaka laughed weirdly.

"…Hey, come on. I totally got you! You're so embarrassed!"

Kyousuke turned his mouth down into a slight frown, but otherwise took his younger sister's ridicule in stride. Whenever he came home after a fight, she found a way to teach him a lesson. *Oh, Ayaka… I may not be able to avoid these pointless fights, but I still hate to make her worry.* Kyousuke's hand clenched into a tight fist.

LICK!

With these fists, he would protect his family from everything wicked in the world. Any snotty brats who might tease Ayaka…any arrogant punks who might catcall her…just like he'd crushed those hooligans earlier, Kyousuke would use these hands to strike down anyone who dared to cross him.

He wasn't exactly sure when he had started to be called things like "Slayer" and "Megadeath." It took a real bunch of geniuses to pick such trashy nicknames, that was for sure, but even so, once word got around, Kyousuke had found himself something of an outcast, feared and distrusted by normal people…and especially by girls his own age, it seemed. The only girl in the world who dared to get close to Kyousuke without hesitation was his little sister.

"…Well, then. I guess I'll head back to the kitchen." Ayaka, retying the strings of her apron, snatched up her ladle, her whole demeanor growing cheerful in an instant. "Mama and the others are still gone for a while on their trip overseas…so I have to do my best! Big brother, why don't you go take care of your wounds? Dinner will be done soon, so you'd better get moving!"

"O-okay." Kyousuke frowned. "Sorry you always have to take care of me."

He was no match for his little sister, who was always so grounded despite her young age. With their parents constantly occupied at work, Ayaka managed to keep the household running like clockwork while still attending school.

She was completely different from her worthless older brother, who did nothing but get in fights. But Ayaka was…

"Ah-ha-ha, you really are a handful. You'd lose your head if it weren't for me, you

know… But I need you, too! You keep me safe, so I can live with a smile on my face! Stay by my side forever, and let me take care of you, 'kay?" She flashed him an innocent grin.

Kyousuke felt his cheeks flush. Apparently Ayaka needed him after all. So he would… "Of course! I'll always be by your side, and I'll give you plenty to worry about."

Days like these were precious, and he wished they could continue on forever.

X X X

"And on to our next item…," the news anchor said. "Just after six PM tonight, the bodies of several young men, all of them appearing to be around twenty years old, were discovered in an abandoned warehouse in the eastern district of Otsuki town. Reports indicate that the police are treating this as a murder case."

The dining room was immaculately clean, decorated in soft uniform shades of white and beige. Kyousuke, who had been gleefully enjoying Ayaka's homemade stuffed cabbage, choked in surprise.

"Big brother?! Hey…a-are you okay?! Don't tell me there was something wrong with my cooking!"

"N-no, but…," Kyousuke coughed, "the news…on TV…" Doubled over, he pointed shakily at the television.

Ayaka rushed around the table, knocking over a chair in her haste. "Huh? The TV news? What's on the news…?" Her eyes followed Kyousuke's finger to the screen.

Displayed there was a clearly abandoned warehouse, barely standing it was so old and

ruined. It was the same place that Kyousuke had been taken by the hooligans just a few hours earlier. They said there had been a murder there?

"Altogether, twelve corpses were discovered," the anchor continued. "The victims appear to have succumbed to extreme blunt force trauma. Investigators say that a large number of weapons, including metal bats and iron pipes, were scattered about the scene and are believed to have been used in the crime. The police will be conducting a full investigation, but cannot rule out the possibility that these young men were involved in some kind of gang violence."

"N-no way!" Staring intently at the screen, Ayaka gave voice to her surprise. "That's close to home, right, Kyousuke? Yeah, it can't be more than a short walk from here…"

Kyousuke remained silent, trying his best to make sense of the situation. A place he'd been just a few hours before…a bunch of punks he'd just beaten down…the same weapons they'd tried to use on him…and now, they were all a bunch of corpses?! Ridiculous! But the way it looked, it was like…

*Like he had gathered them up in the warehouse, sealed it off, and slaughtered each and every one of them.*

"…Hey, big brother…what's up? You look pale." Ayaka's voice was heavy with

concern. “Could it be…? Don’t tell me *you* had something to do with this?!”

“No! I don’t know anything about it!” Kyousuke’s voice came out so loud that it even surprised him.

For a moment, Ayaka recoiled from his frightening expression. However, she immediately stood back up straight, taking hold of her confused brother.

“Calm down, Kyousuke! What are you so worried about? It’s not like you were involved…right?”

Kyousuke remained silent.

“Please…just tell me,” Ayaka pleaded softly. “Did you go to that warehouse today, big brother? What happened there? You don’t have to tell me all at once, but just talk to me, okay?” As she spoke, Ayaka gently rubbed Kyousuke’s tense shoulders, and gradually his heart rate returned to normal.

The anchor on the TV was already reading another news story.

“A-ah…sorry. I’m fine, Ayaka, really…I’m just…sorry.”

“I know, I’m not worried,” she assured him. “I just…I want to hear about it.”

“You’re sure? All right…I’ll tell you, Ayaka.” And Kyousuke did.

He told her about the abandoned warehouse where he’d been taken, about how he had turned the tables on the twelve hooligans by himself. How he had done it all with his bare hands, not using a single weapon. And how he had definitely not killed any of them, leaving the hooligans beaten and battered—but alive—as he fled the scene.

As Kyousuke finished his story, Ayaka’s face took on an unusually serious expression. “So then, do you think that after you left, somebody went to the exact same warehouse, and…

and murdered those people? Is that what you're telling me?" Kyousuke nodded. "I'm sure if you talk to the police…I'm sure you can clear this up."

"Hmm…I guess…I guess you're right." Kyousuke fished his cell phone from his pocket, flicking through his contacts in search of a particular name. "First, I'll talk to Zenigata."

Zenigata was a detective, a veteran of the force, who was always looking after Kyousuke, even though it often got him into trouble. He was one of the few people who understood Kyousuke, understood how he all too often found himself on the receiving end of a misunderstanding. With a deep breath, Kyousuke prepared to push the call button.

*Diiing-dooong.*

*Diiing-dooong...*

"Huh? Who is that at this time…? Maybe a package from Mom?" The faulty doorbell continued to ring, as though it were breaking down for good, and in that moment, a chill ran down Kyousuke's spine. He had a *very* bad feeling about this.

"Wait, Ayaka!" Kyousuke managed to stop his little sister, who was turning toward the entryway. "I'm…I'm going out. You wait here. Got it?"

"Big brother…? Y-yeah…I got it."

He left Ayaka standing in the dining room with a worried expression and headed toward the door. As he advanced down the hallway, the terrible feeling settled into his gut, growing stronger, thicker, heavier. *Could it be? With timing like this?*

"Excuse me for calling so late at night. You must be Kyousuke Kamiya?" A well-kept

man wearing a neat black leather jacket—clearly a policeman—stood in the entryway, several subordinates in shabby suits shuffling behind him. He closed the notebook he was carrying and turned his stern gaze on Kyousuke. His eyes were predatory, the eyes of a hunter accustomed to catching its prey.

He had a menacing aura about him that was quite at odds with his friendly tone and polite speech. He seemed nothing like the other cops that Kyousuke knew. *Criminal Investigation Unit 1*. They handled high-profile murders. The dark feeling in his guts began to squirm.

Kyousuke cleared his dry, sticky throat. "Y-yeah…I'm Kyousuke Kamiya. But—"

"Do you have a moment?" The detective cut him off sharply.

"Y-yes. That is, I don't mind. I-in fact, I was just about to call the police about an incident that happened in a nearby abandoned warehouse a little while ago……"

"Hmm…in that case, this is perfect." The detective didn't smile. "Why don't you come give a statement down at the station?" As he spoke, he drew a pair of handcuffs from his belt, snapping them around Kyousuke's wrists with a cold, metallic click.

"Eh…?" *This didn't make sense.* The policeman's eyes seemed to bore right through Kyousuke, as though he were looking past a pile of garbage. "D-detective! What the hell kind of joke is this?"

"Kyousuke Kamiya," the man recited his name, practically spitting the syllables. Kyousuke thought of his accomplishments, the peaceful times he'd treasured, the happiness he had managed to hold on to up to this point. The detective's next words swept all that away.

"With regard to the incident in which twelve young men were murdered inside an abandoned warehouse in the eastern district of Otsuki town—*I am placing you under arrest as a suspect*."

x x x

"…And that's how it is," Kurumiya continued. "The sixteen of you are gathered here in the first-year Class A at Purgatorium Remedial Academy because you are all killers. Take a look around, eh? Everyone you see is the same: a murderer. The tough-looking ones…the ones that seem harmless…all the same! Heh-heh-heh…you should definitely take this chance to get as buddy-buddy as you can in the next few hours." She finished with another childish giggle.

Kyousuke clenched a fist under his desk, resisting the urge to stand, to shout, to flee. He was trapped. *Get friendly…? As if I could get friendly with these scumbags! What a joke!* He kept his head low, shaking only slightly.

Fifteen murderers, all in the same room with him…it was almost too much. And then Kyousuke realized that no, there weren't fifteen, not anymore, anyway. As Kurumiya had been speaking in her oppressive yet sweetly lisping way, people in white medical garb had come and fished Mohawk out from the ocean of blood, carrying his mangled, nearly unrecognizable form away on a stretcher with a practiced manner.

He wondered if Mohawk had also committed murder. He shuddered, thinking that he had gone and picked a fight with someone like that. If Kurumiya hadn't shown up, Kyousuke

probably would have been the one carried out on a stretcher. A school where juvenile convicts were gathered—he'd heard about it and thought that surely it was a place like a reform school; clearly, he'd been naive. A whole class full of murderers…it seemed unreal. *This is bad…this is really bad. A place like this, I've got nowhere to turn.* There was no way that in this schoolhouse full of lunatics there was another normal person like Kyousuke.

Even though he had been arrested as a murderer, even though he had been found guilty, even though he had been forced into this madhouse of a school…there had to have been some mistake! This wasn't right, this couldn't be!

And yet, there was nothing he could do. Just by being here, enrolled in this school, Kyousuke was a murderer in everyone's eyes but his own. Kurumiya, his classmates…he might as well have been one of them.

*I feel like a sheep thrown into a wolves' den.* If word got out that he was just a normal teenager…would he be laughed at…humiliated? Or worse, he might be killed on the spot! *I guess I don't have much of a choice… I'll have to pretend that I'm a murderer, too.* Faced with the threat of a gruesome death at the hands of his classmates, Kyousuke steeled himself.

"Okeydokey, then," Kurumiya was saying. "I'll have you each come forward, one by one, and give us all a little self-introduction. Tell us your name and age, how many people you killed, how you killed them, your motives and so on…and make it good, 'kay?" She grinned menacingly. "You each have three minutes. We'll go in seating arrangement order. Oh, and if you try to screw around or crack jokes…I'll make you puke blood."

Hefting the still-sticky pipe over one petite shoulder, Kurumiya stepped away from the lectern. Within such easy reach of that lethal weapon, the pressure to give an acceptable

self-introduction was palpable.

Kyousuke, however, was facing a unique difficulty. He would be expected to explain the method of his killings and his motivation, but he had never killed anyone in the first place. Clearly he'd have to make something up, but every one of the other students listening was an experienced murderer. Shuddering under the weight of anxiety, Kyousuke wondered how he could possibly get through this alive.

"…Geez, what a pain," grumbled the older girl next to him as she rose to her feet, stifling a yawn. She seemed to be up first. Tossing her manicure tools down onto her desk, she languidly approached the podium, and Kyousuke noticed, for the first time, her incredible beauty.

She had smooth alabaster skin and delicate, handsome features. She wore her rust-red hair in a long, wavy ponytail, the shapely bangs framing an aristocratic face. Her eyes, the same dark wine color as her hair, were half closed, her full eyelashes casting thin shadows over lightly made-up cheeks.

She was tall and slender, with a model's figure. Her legs extending from beneath her short skirt were long and beautiful, and the black-and-white striped kneesocks offered a tantalizing glimpse of her upper thighs.

Kyousuke gulped, feeling a different kind of tension than before.

She sat right next to him, so he could probably try and talk to her.

Not that he would, of course. Not after her introduction.

"I'm Eiri Akabane," she began in a listless voice. "Fifteen years old. I've killed…six

people."

She— Eiri said it as though it were nothing.

"…Wha—?!" The classroom was noisy. Even Kurumiya seemed somewhere between astonished and impressed. Everyone looked shocked at the number of people she had killed. And it was no wonder, for who would think that such a lovely girl was a cutthroat who had taken six people's lives?

"I mean…whatever." Dropping her gaze to her half-finished manicure, she continued, seeming mildly annoyed, "…I slit their throats with knives. The usual way. No reason. Not really. Even if I had one, I don't remember it. So, no reason. Is that all? Eh, I guess. Anyway, nice to meet you." Finishing with another small yawn, Eiri stepped down from the lectern.

*She's seriously bad news. I was fooled by her appearance, but…* Kyousuke glanced sidelong at Eiri, who had taken her seat and resumed decorating her nails. *No way can I get involved with her.* He wiped away a cold sweat, trying to regain his focus. *All of my classmates are murderers. That's the way it is. Even the ones that look harmless. I can't forget that.*

"Hey, next in line! What're you waiting for?!" Kurumiya's irritated voice jolted the class back to attention. "Get to the podium on the double! Unless you wanna be disciplined?!"

There was a crash from somewhere behind and to the left of Kyousuke's seat. "Eeee!! S-ssss-ssowwy! Owow…" A petite girl with short chestnut-colored hair made her way up the aisle, her slippers flapping audibly. "R-really sowwy……I was s-ssss-spaced out! Waaahh!" With an appearance reminiscent of a small, vulnerable animal and a childish,

inarticulate way of speaking, the tiny girl seemed so shaken by Kurumiya's angry tone that she barely made it to the lectern, tripping over herself several times in the process.

Her tear-soaked, flaxen-colored eyes wandered restlessly left and right, and she said, "A-ahm…well, it's…ah…sorry for being born!" She bowed vigorously…and with an audible *whack!* threw her forehead into the flat wooden top of the podium.

The classroom fell silent again. The girl didn't move, her forehead stuck where it had impacted, until finally: "Wa…wah…waaaaaaaah…" Her stiff body began to tremble, little by little.

*Now see here, don't cry*, thought Kyousuke, just as Kurumiya readied her iron pipe and said, "Go ahead and cry. Should I smash your stupid skull?" Her face was perfectly expressionless, her threatening voice low and dry.

The trembling girl's body twitched with a noticeable start, and she raised her tear-streaked face. "I-I'b alweady…cwyinnng…sowwwyyy…*hic*."

"Hmph." Kurumiya's cheek twitched. Kyousuke was sure it was over. Probably anyone would have thought the same. The girl let out a small shriek, clearly at her wit's end, and pressed her eyes closed, hard. "Hmm, well, I guess that's that, eh?" Kurumiya sighed.

The iron pipe swung downward, slicing audibly through the air with bone-crushing force.

"Continue your self-introduction. You have one minute, forty-six seconds remaining." The tip of the iron pipe had come to a stop just inches from crushing the small girl's skull.

"……Wha—?" The girl opened her eyes a sliver to see that Kurumiya had already replaced the iron pipe back over her shoulder and fallen back half a step.

Facing the girl, whose eyes were still wide with terror, Kurumiya spoke again. "Heya,

stupid! What do you think you're doing, huh? Get on with it already! Don't think that just 'cause you're such a pip-squeak, you can test me." Apparently Kurumiya felt some sympathy for the girl; maybe looking at her reminded the sadistic teacher of herself in some small way.

"Eh? Ah…y-yeeeeees!!" Wasting no more time, the small girl at the podium straightened her shoulders and raised her voice, speaking in a skittering lilt without pausing or breathing.

"Maina Igarashi, fourteen years old! My favorite foods are fluffy things and springy things and sweet things, and my least favorite foods are crunchy things and sticky things and bitter things—I meeeaaan—ah, um, what was it…o-oh yeah! The number of people you killed! I've killed…"

Tears filled the small girl's—Maina's—eyes once more. She bit her lip and continued in a shaky voice, "…Three people. But that was an accident…because I'm stupid. Because of me, everyone…" She'd begun to sob now in short, high-pitched shudders. "I didn't kill them because I wanted to…*hic*…I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm an idiot, I'm so sowwy…I didn't say that right. I'm incompetent, but nice to meetchu…I didn't say id wight agwain. Ah, I messed ub the mess ub!" Maina dejectedly returned to her desk, her tear-soaked face showing an awareness of profound sin.

Looking at Maina, who sobbed convulsively in her seat, Kyousuke felt his heart lighten. *There is one, a decent person! Murder is murder, but…* The impression given by the first girl had been so jarring that he'd thought for sure that his classmates were nothing but deviants incapable of contemplating anything other than cold-blooded murder…but thinking

it over, Kyousuke realized that there were probably a handful who'd committed crimes of passion.

Maina had said that it was an "accident." She had said that she didn't kill them because she wanted to. She seemed just like a normal schoolgirl, this young woman who had killed people through no intention of her own and who now trembled under the terrible weight of her crime. Why, if you took her out of this obscene circumstance…*Igarashi must also be uneasy in this place…that's it!*

Kyousuke resolved to try to talk with her as soon as possible. And if there were any other normal classmates, they could all form a group together and oppose dangerous people like Eiri. It seemed like the best idea he had.

"Okay, okay, next! There's thirteen of you left, so let's get on with it already!" Despite Kurumiya's impatient tone, Kyousuke relaxed, letting some of the tension slip from his shoulders. He didn't know how the next hour would go, but surprisingly, he thought he could manage.

X X X

…There was no way he would manage.

Two more classmates had given their self-introductions after Maina, and they very much belonged here. Kyousuke could feel his earlier sense of relief rapidly slipping away.

The first had been a small hunchbacked boy surrounded by an aura of melancholy who introduced himself as Kagerou Usami. Most of his face had been hidden by long, greasy

bangs, and he'd mumbled in a low voice that made him difficult to understand. From what little Kyousuke had been able to make out, Usami had killed one person, but he'd mostly spent his time at the podium reciting strange names that Kyousuke didn't recognize, like "Jeffrey Dahmer" and "Ed Gein." *...Maybe they're actors?* The strange hunchback oozed a curious grotesqueness, and Kyousuke made a note to avoid him as much as possible.

After Usami was a tall boy with dark skin who wore thick dreadlocks and sunglasses even indoors; Arata Oonogi, he'd said his name was, before proudly boasting about how he'd "broken up two lovebirds with his knife." Nothing close to remorse had passed over his face as he'd recounted the murders: He didn't even seem to be aware that he'd committed a crime. Another student that Kyousuke would have to try his best to avoid.

And after Oonogi…

"Next is the asshole in the very front row! Go on up!" Kyousuke's turn had arrived. Swallowing audibly, he stood—fists clenched, brow dripping with sweat—and, trying to keep his body's trembling in check, ascended to the podium. With a deep breath, he turned to face the room.

The scene was like something out of a hallucination…or a nightmare. Inside the graffiti-covered ruins of a high school classroom, arranged in four rows and four columns, the bizarre assortment of student criminals seemed even stranger and more threatening, and Kyousuke, who was accustomed to dealing with delinquents and thugs, couldn't help but cringe. *No way...what are these people? Are there no decent ones after all?* He could feel every murderous eye in the room watching his every move, and it filled him with a deep sense of dread. He wanted to escape somehow, to run and not look back…but that wasn't an

option. *I've got to give it all I've got; I won't back down from a bunch of low-life killers.*

Gathering his mental fortitude, Kyousuke glared out across the class. "…Kyousuke Kamiya, fifteen years old. The number of people I killed is twe—" He hesitated. While he couldn't admit that he'd never killed anyone, would confessing to the crime they'd falsely pinned on him really be a good idea? *No, I'll just have to give a different number, something small, something believable. After all, the nail that sticks up gets the hammer.* Even in a place like this, it wouldn't be a good idea to stand out.

"Um…the number of people I've killed is one. I didn't use a weapon, I beat him to death with my bare hands—"

"You're lyyyiiing," Kurumiya interrupted. "You killed twelve people, didn't you, Kamiya? Is our all-star murderer feeling modest about having *the highest kill count in the class*? Heh-heh-heh!"

Kyousuke didn't have a reply. Just like that, his planned illusion had been shattered, swept away by the giggling schoolgirl teacher, who now grinned at him with sadistic glee. *I've "killed" more than anyone? I'm the head of a class of murderers?!*

Staring at Kyousuke, who was rapidly turning an ashen shade of white, Kurumiya continued, the rest of the class murmuring while she twisted the knife, as though this were some ordinary schoolyard gossip that had nothing to do with mass murder.

"You locked twelve older boys in a warehouse, and then, using metal bats and chains and concrete blocks and anything else you could get your hands on, you totally slaughtered them, isn't that right? I've met a lot of killers, but in all of Japan, there's no one as atrocious as you! Why, on kill count alone, you're ranked fifth in the history of the country! Second for

most kills at once, just behind the 'Tsuyama Thirty Massacre.' And not only that, you didn't even use a gun! You *beat* them to death with whatever was lying around! And to top it all off, you're still a minor! How absolutely hellish! I bet you were planning on acting all mature and aloof, thinking you'd trick me right along with the rest of the class, eh? But so much for that idea, huh? That's right…I promise here and now that I'm gonna beat that cowardly, cunning little mind of yours into shape!!"

*That's it… I'm done for!* Kyousuke could hear the whispers of his classmates.

"Who the hell is this guy, Kyousuke Kamiya…? He's really horrible! Double digits? That's too awful!!" "A mass murder? Twelve people at once? That's crazy! What a frightful person! Ha-ha-ha…," "H-hee-hee…the spurting body fluids, the gray matter flying around, the agonized death shrieks… Hee-hee-hee-hee…," "Oh…scary…that's scary…help me, Daddy…Mommy…get me out of here…," and so on. Every voice, even those that mumbled incoherently, was filled with a mix of fear and admiration, intrigue and envy.

In perhaps the worst possible turn of events, Kyousuke had just gotten everyone's attention. And there was no going back now. *Dammit! Now I'm a target for sure… After class, I bet, someone's going to…* He hung his head, shoulders drooping, and returned to his seat in a gloomy mood.

As soon as he took his place, however, Kyousuke felt someone's stare bore into him, and looking around, he saw the beautiful young woman and killer of six—Eiri—was looking him over with a piercing gaze.

Immediately, she averted her eyes, returning to her nail art. *Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse.* There could be little doubt: Eiri Akabane was interested in him.

Whether her strange hostility was born of curiosity or envy, Kyousuke couldn't tell. Her drowsy gaze only seemed to sharpen when focused on him.

Those rust-red eyes, sharp like blades… Kyousuke's skin prickled in horror, and for a moment, it felt as if a knife was lodged in his throat. *This is bad…really bad! Not just Eiri…everyone is looking at me!* As the self-introductions continued, Kyousuke wondered how many days he could survive.

"Hello, everyone. I'm the 'Japanese Ted Bundy,' Shinji Saotome. Heh-heh… I'm sure you all know who that is, right? Ted Bundy? He's that peerless strangler from America, the murderer whom I admire and respect the most! And while I personally can't compare with his marvelous thirty-person kill count…well, I *have* killed two people, both of them girls. I strangled them with my bare hands… I could feel it all between my fingers…especially their final, delicate breaths…

"Of course, afterward, I also… Well, let's just say that I *indulged* myself a little. To be frank, I'm a necrophile. I love girls, especially the beautiful ones, and especially when they look just like dolls. Like Eiri Akabane from earlier! …Ah, anyway, Kyousuke Kamiya, let me say that I truly respect you as a killer. It's nice to make your acquaintance."

The boy was pale and delicate, beautiful at a glance but utterly horrible. When their eyes met, he winked at Kyousuke, who felt his stomach turn. There was no doubt: This Shinji was completely, irredeemably insane.

*Of course he thinks I'm just like him…everybody does!* To add to his nicknames, Slayer

and Megadeath, now came the "Warehouse Butcher," killer of twelve! And it wasn't a nickname that would have any traction among the delinquents and hooligans he was familiar with. No, the people attracted to this label would be insane murderers and psychotic perverts. Kyousuke couldn't help but groan as he thought of the trials awaiting him. *Is this what my life has come to?*

X X X

"…Well, then. Everyone's done with their self-introduction now, right?" Kurumiya retook her place at the podium. "Oh yeah, I guess there was that one pigheaded bastard from before…probably dying now…but if he pulls through, I guess he'll be back sooner or later."

The atmosphere instantly grew heavy and tense. Kurumiya tapped the iron pipe on her shoulder, looking out across the class of murderers with a faint smile. There was not the slightest hint of fear in her wide, youthful eyes, and though she may have looked like nothing so much as an elementary school student, it seemed that, even if the whole class were to gang up and rush her at once, she would be impossible to kill.

"Well, what are your impressions, now that we've all finished our self-introductions? Are you starting to see that every single one of you is an irredeemable shit stain, huh? —I mean, where do you think you are? This school is society's garbage dump, a place where trash like you is thrown away, together. A dumpster, a pigsty, a home for demonic subhuman filth! You starting to catch on?"

What Kurumiya said was unfortunately true, thought Kyousuke.

While there were a handful of students who, like Maina, had killed accidentally, most had either done it on purpose, knowing exactly what they did, or were the type who thought nothing of a little casual murder. *I'm supposed to lead an academic life stuck with these bastards? Impossible!* But it wasn't like he had a choice.

They were so foreign to him: their ideas, their mind-sets, their ideals and reasons… Kyousuke couldn't understand them at all. And he certainly didn't understand why he had been thrown in here with them. An abnormal institution for even more abnormal students.

"Is this hell?" Kurumiya was saying. "No, it's purgatory. A purgatorium where your filthy little souls, black with sin, can be burned clean. And our duty as teachers is to beat your ugly, warped natures back into proper shape, to hammer and chisel and cut away until we're left with something beautiful. And believe me, we'll do whatever it takes…heh-heh-heh!"

Hijiri Kurumiya—an abnormal teacher supervising abnormal students. *No one should cross this demon girl of a teacher.* Kyousuke's thoughts were interrupted by an angry roar.

"Especially you! You monster, Kyousuke Kamiya! The filth stuck to you is worse than anyone else. I plan to properly purify you. Hell, I'm looking forward to it! You killed twelve people, so I should be twelve times as rough with you, right? Do you think you'll die first or go insane?" All eyes in the room were fixed on him.

"…Ha…ha-ha-ha…" *There's nothing I can do but laugh in a situation like this.*

"Hey, you little shithead! What the hell are you laughing at?! Do you want to be disciplined that badly?! Huh?!"

"Wha—?! No, that's not it! That's not it at all!" Kyousuke immediately apologized. "It's not like that, so you can put down the pipe… There's no need to smash my face in! I'm really

sorry, honestly, I won't make trouble, so you can just let it go!" *I take that back. This is not a laughing situation.*

Kurumiya snorted at the groveling Kyousuke with derision and slowly lowered the iron pipe. "Hmm…okay. But I'll be paying special attention to you from now on! I wonder how long you can keep that cowardly act up, eh? It would be great if you tried your best… Oh, and the same goes for the rest of you filthy little killers! I'm in charge here, and every single one of you is gonna kneel before me in agony and terror! I'm gonna stomp the hope right out of you! Do you worthless scum get it? There's no such thing as 'human rights' here!" She smacked her palm against the blackboard, sending a wave of silence rippling through the class.

The speaker near the ceiling shook, and a hoarse chime rang out. "Hmm? Is it already time?" Kurumiya frowned, looking down at her rough, gunmetal-gray watch. "I guess so… All right, worms! We'll have a short recess. Your next class starts in ten minutes, and if you're not in your seat by the time second period starts…I'll be just thrilled to break you! Heh-heh-heh!" She wore a crooked smile on her sweet, innocent-looking face, an expression that did nothing to hint at the violent sadist beneath.

Kyousuke silently stewed at his desk.

X X X

"…Wait, you." As Kyousuke was rising from his seat, a cold voice, sharp like a knife, stopped him in his tracks. He awkwardly slunk back down into his chair, reluctantly turning

to face the speaker.

"…What is it, Eiri Akabane?"

"Eiri is fine," the young woman replied. "Tell me, did you really kill twelve people?" She mentioned it so casually. There were daggers in her half-lidded eyes, and though she kept her head bowed over her painted nails, those eyes tracked Kyousuke's every movement. Her inquiry seemed more like a cross-examination than a genuine question.

"Ah no…th-that is…," Kyousuke stammered, averting his eyes from her intense gaze.

"Pardon me," interrupted another voice. "Would you be so kind as to allow me to join the conversation? I had meant to speak with you during the break, but it seems you've been otherwise engaged before I could reach you." It was a bright, amiable voice, and when Kyousuke turned to face the new speaker, he was met with the sight of a beautiful, gentle-looking boy with light brown hair, wearing a friendly smile. "Lovely to meet you both, by the way! I'm the strangler, Shinji Saotome. I'm so pleased to be in the same class with you two splendid killers. Truly, it is an honor."

"Uh…yeah," Kyousuke muttered. "S-same to you." He stared at the other boy's outstretched hand and, hesitating, looked back at Shinji with an insincere smile.

As Shinji's strangely cold, clammy hand met his, Kyousuke felt a chill run across his skin, as though thousands of insects were crawling all over his body. Shinji had strangled two girls with that hand.

"Hee-hee. Thank you very much, Mr. Kamiya, and Miss Eiri, too—"

She stared at Shinji's extended hand, the barest hint of disgust passing over her expression. "Could you put that filthy paw away?"

For a moment Shinji's beaming exterior cracked at the insult, but he quickly recovered, flashing her a twisted smile. "Dirty, me? That's simply too cruel! I may be a certified sadist, it's true, but lately I've been coming around to masochi—"

"Are you deaf?" Eiri interrupted. "If you don't put that hand away, I'm gonna lop your arm off." And as soon as she'd finished spitting the words in his face, Eiri returned her attention to her manicure.

For a moment, Shinji said nothing, lowering his hand with a blank expression. But then, he broke into another eerie grin. "I see, I see…so very interesting. I don't hate girls like you, you know. It makes me want to kill you even more! I really want to get to know you now, hmm?" Shinji's eyes crawled up Eiri's crossed legs toward her short-hemmed skirt.

"…Okay, whatever, would you piss off?" she answered, intentionally uncrossing and recrossing her legs. "How annoying." Eiri yawned, long eyelashes fluttering provocatively.

Shinji narrowed his eyes and, shifting his gaze from Eiri's thighs, looked at Kyousuke and shrugged. "It appears that I was intruding after all. Nothing to do but graciously withdraw. Have fun, you two. I'll see you later, Mr. Kamiya…and you, too, Eiri." And with that, he clapped Kyousuke lightly on the shoulder and strolled away, all smiles and carefree demeanor…except for the bone-chilling look in his eyes. Kyousuke shuddered and hoped he'd been imagining that icy gaze.

"…How annoying," Eiri remarked acridly, staring at Shinji's back as he left the classroom. "It'd be better if he died."

Kyousuke looked at her with a mix of awe and fear. "Hey, now, when you say it would be better if he died, does that mean that you, Miss Akabane…"

“Eiri is fine.”

“…R-right, sorry. Then, Miss Eiri—”

“I thought I said just Eiri?”

Watching her watch him in sideways glances made Kyousuke nervous. There was no way that she was really upset about what name he called her…but this girl was the “Scarlet Slasher.” Who knew what might set her off?

“Um…E-Eiri?” Kyousuke recoiled a bit. “Eh, how do I put it…? Let’s try to play nice, yeah?”

“Hmm? What are you saying? We’re being perfectly nice, aren’t we?”

“R-right, sure. Well, if that’s the case, maybe you could stop giving me the stink eye and just look at me straight on? You know, talk to me like a normal person? Or at least stop glaring! It’s making me nervous.”

Eiri clicked her tongue in audible irritation. “Are you trying to start something?”

“What? That’d be crazy! And anyway, aren’t you the one starting things?!” Kyousuke replied. “Why do you have to be so snappy? If you hadn’t given attitude to Shinji just then —”

"Could you try not to say stupid things?" Eiri's expression had grown focused, almost predatory. Her half-lidded eyes had opened nearly all the way and sparkled like a naked blade.

"Eh! Ah, I think I said too much, as usual, I…"

"Didn't you hear his self-introduction? That guy killed only girls, two of them, and he's a total pervert. There's not a girl alive who would make nice with him."

"W-well, yeah, but…" *But you also killed six people, didn't you?* Kyousuke swallowed the words before they could escape his mouth. Besides his alleged twelve murders, Eiri's six were the highest in the class.

Trying to rein in his expanding sense of terror, Kyousuke changed the subject. "By the way, there's one thing I've been wondering this whole time…what did Shinji mean what he said he 'indulged himself' with the girls he killed?"

"Hmph." Eiri frowned at him. "That's hardly something you should be asking me." Rubbing her temples, she recrossed her long legs. Kyousuke couldn't help but look.

Perched as she was on her chair, Eiri's skirt was so short that there was barely any point to her wearing it at all. All kinds of things might have been visible. Actually, Kyousuke was looking right at them. *Black-and-white striped panties…is it? Even the girls' underpants are assigned by the institution! Even so, she really has beautiful legs…but I shouldn't stare!!*

Eiri sighed in obvious disgust. "Are you an idiot? He…had his way with them. Fulfilled some kind of sick fetish or fantasy. Guys like him, they can't *do it* unless their partner is dead."

"Y-you don't mean…?" Kyousuke felt his gut sour in revulsion.

"You can't expect me to say it aloud." Eiri glared. Her eyes were almost completely open, and there was an unexpected flush to her complexion.

Kyousuke realized that a change of conversation was overdue. "S-sorry…I get it. There's no helping it, huh? He's really disgusting." Perhaps Eiri wasn't as worldly as her provocative appearance seemed to suggest.

She snorted dismissively. "Right? If you get it, that's fine… If you *actually* get it."

Eiri turned her face away again. Kyousuke examined her in profile. "But then, if that's how he is, don't you think it might have been a bad idea? Making enemies with a dangerous creep like that?"

"Why?" Eiri's expression didn't change at all. "If he tries to kill me, I'll just kill him first." Her confidence seemed absolute.

"…You can't be serious." But of course, she was the top murderer in a room full of psychopaths. Kyousuke absolutely did not want to see her bad side. After all, he'd already made it this far.

"Most of the students here are nothing more than amateur punks, right? And if any of them were thinking about clumsily committing more murders, I wouldn't even have to bother killing them. They'd be sent to the next world via iron pipe. Like Mohawk this morning."

"Well, that's certainly true, but…" *Don't call them "amateur punks" where they can hear it!*

"If a tough guy like Mohawk was beaten like that, seeing a girl like you… Look, even if you're the Scarlet Slasher, I don't want to see you like that."

Eiri's jaw slackened just a bit. "You idiot. That goes without saying, doesn't it? Don't lump me together with that trash. It's insulting. I choose my own opponents…of course, I choose my own kills, too." Her voice had trailed off to a faint whisper.

Before Kyousuke could ask something in return, Shinji appeared in the doorway and made a beeline toward them.

"*Tch.* Why did he have to come back?" Eiri clicked her tongue again, then returned to working on her manicure. On each crimson-painted nail, she applied individual rhinestones with a set of small tweezers. *She kept that up even in the middle of class, and the teacher didn't say a word.*

"Hello again, Mr. Kamiya," Shinji began cheerfully. "How far did you get with Miss Eiri while I was away?"

"How far?" Kyousuke's brow furrowed. "We were just chatting." *Did Shinji really think he'd come back to find us holding hands or something?* From the corner of his eye, Kyousuke caught Eiri giving him a fleeting glance.

Shinji stared outward like an actor on stage.

"Come now, that's no good, Mr. Kamiya! When you meet a pretty girl, you have to close the deal within five minutes! In this class, that's already impossible, you know… Nope, that self-introduction was definitely a blunder. No one knows anything about me in Class B, so I went over there to try and make a play, but…it's no good, you know. There was not a satisfactory woman in sight! Oh, there was this huge girl, really monstrously large, and another weird one wearing a black gas mask, but…it certainly looks like our class got the best of the best! Ha-ha!"

"H-heh…I, uh…I guess you've been busy," Kyousuke replied uncomfortably. *Of course there are other classes! But a gas mask…that seems like a little much.* Not that it mattered much… He wanted nothing to do with any of them.

"Okeydokey, is everyone in their seats? If you're not, you'll be mincemeat!" Accompanied by a raspy chime, Kurumiya returned to the classroom carrying large stacks of printouts.

Kyousuke straightened himself up in a near panic. Next to him, Eiri stifled another yawn, her demeanor unchanged despite the entrance of their psychotic teacher. *Eiri Akabane, huh…? She's more of a normal person than I thought, but…* Of course, it was still a good idea to avoid her, if he could. *I'll just try not to talk to her again.*

X X X

"…Hey, Kyousuke?" Eiri wasted no time as the chime signaling the end of class rang. Kyousuke had been gathering the handouts the teacher had distributed, while Eiri carefully placed her manicure tools away in her makeup pouch. "Did you have plans for lunch?"

"Uh, oh, food. Right." It hadn't even occurred to Kyousuke that the next period was a lunch break. As for Eiri's offer…after everything that had already happened in the first three periods, he really should know better than to accept. On the other hand, this Purgatorium Remedial Academy did seem more like a *normal* school than he'd expected.

There were five sixty-minute general education classes per day, carried out in accordance with a set schedule. Japanese language, social studies, math, science, music, art,

physical education, technology, home economics, English language…plus ten morals courses. Daily life at Purgatorium Remedial seemed a lot like school life outside the prison industry. The dorms and tests, supplementary lessons and supplementary examinations, all seemed just the same.

Even the campus was ordinary, aside from the "discipline rooms," a small number of special classrooms, and the peculiarities of the interior design. Getting off the premises was especially difficult, but within school grounds, the students were allowed to conduct themselves freely.

For example, at lunchtime, each individual was allowed to have a meal in the cafeteria or get food at the school store. And as suggested by their earlier conversation, Eiri seemed to want to go to lunch with Kyousuke.

And while there was no boy who wouldn't be happy to be invited by a girl as beautiful as Eiri, there was one little issue. *She may be beautiful, but she's the top murderer in the class…a genuine killer.* However, the person she had chosen to ask to lunch was supposedly the killer with the *twelve*-person kill count.

It went beyond a simple false accusation: If Kyousuke thoughtlessly exposed the fact that he had never killed anyone, his situation could change suddenly and for the worse. He might be killed on the spot or possibly meet with a horrible "accident." Letting his secret slip would be suicide, but the longer he spent with someone like Eiri, the more likely it would become that he would make a mistake.

"Hey, Kyousuke, pick up the pace. We only have one hour."

"Ah, sorry…I don't have much of an appetite. I might just go kill time somewhere."

"…Oh. Well, I don't really care, but…" Eiri left her nail tools where they were, half put away, and turned from him. "The offer stands, anyway. Well, go on." Her cheeks were a little puffed out. Could he have put his safety at risk by turning her down?

If so, he'd better make a break for it and fast. Flustered, Kyousuke quickly stood from his seat. "Well, then, I'll be going." But he didn't move right away. No, there was something he had to warn her about. "By the way, about *that* guy…"

"Him? Oh…don't mind him. If he picks a fight, I'll beat him at his own game." What worried Kyousuke were Shinji's unusual proclivities, though Eiri, of course, seemed unconcerned.

"That's what I thought. But just in case…be careful."

Shinji stood alongside the wall at the back of the classroom, talking with two other male students: Usami and Oonogi—the eerie hunchback kid and the dreadlocked guy with dark skin. While they spoke, they occasionally glanced over at Kyousuke with conspiratorial eyes.

As a man, he felt he couldn't leave Eiri here alone in this situation, but as Kyousuke the upstanding normal citizen, he felt that he didn't want to get entangled in the company of a murderer and that feeling was much stronger. He didn't mind being called a coward.

"S-see you…later?"

"…Yeah, sure. Later."

His fear prevailing, Kyousuke finished exchanging good-byes with Eiri and, giving Shinji a halfhearted wave that was cheerfully returned in kind, made a quick exit.

*Thank God I escaped in one piece.* But despite having a moment or two to catch his

breath, Kyousuke knew that he couldn't let his guard down just yet. The hallway that stretched before him featured long rows of windows fitted with iron bars, and the walls were covered in the same sort of graffiti that had adorned every surface of the classroom.

As he strode down the crowded hallway, Kyousuke tried to put on an air of confidence, hoping to hide his frazzled nerves. *Is it really true? Has every one of these people killed someone? Sh-shit*... He tried his best to avoid making eye contact with any of the other students.

The facilities at the Purgatorium Remedial Academy included three main buildings: two newer four-story school buildings, as well as one older two-story structure. The oldest building stood somewhat separate from the others and had apparently been allowed to fall halfway into ruin. It was in this third building that the activities of Kyousuke and the other first-year students were largely confined.

Classrooms were located on the second story of the building, while the ground floor housed the infirmary, school shop, and cafeteria—even their meals were taken separately from the second- and third-year students. In fact, it seemed that, except for a handful of specialized facilities, like the gymnasium and dojo, the first-years were completely isolated. In fact, Kyousuke had yet to lay eyes on an upperclassman even once.

*I think I can guess why we're kept so far apart.* The Purgatorium Remedial Academy was a school for reforming murderers. Within its walls, the greatest danger likely came from the new students, who had yet to be rehabilitated at all. The authorities probably assumed that if they were allowed contact with the upperclassmen, whose rehabilitation was well under way, they would cause all sorts of trouble, so they'd stuffed them away in their own

building and slapped a lid over the whole stinking lot.

*Eh?! Th-that girl! She's huge! Like, pro-wrestler huge! And that guy over there…his skin is covered in so many tattoos it looks like he's turned green!!* It appeared that the people in the other class, in Class B, were also weird villains. There was not a single one of them with innocent eyes—some carried a devious glint, while others were cloudy with sin.

Kyousuke quickened his pace, hoping to get out before he got caught up in another stupid situation, but before he could make it to freedom, a clamorous staccato slapping sound quickly closed in from behind. *Huh? What the hell is that noise…? Footsteps?! Don't tell me someone's chasing me!*

Kyousuke whipped around to see a slight girl with chestnut-colored hair running full tilt down the hallway—Maina Igarashi, the crying girl from before, was barreling straight toward him, eyelids squeezed shut, head thrown back, and wailing at the top of her lungs.

"Waaaaaah! I give up, waaah! I wanna go hoooooome!" In the very next moment, she tripped over her own feet and tumbled head over heels, crashing right into Kyousuke, who was too flustered to avoid her. The two went flying.

"Ow, ow… Is that…is that you, Igarashi?" Kyousuke, now sporting a wicked headache, picked himself up, surveying the damage. "Ehh?!" About a meter away, Maina was planted, facedown and bottom up, on the linoleum floor. Her skirt was flipped up, and her black-and-white striped panties were in full view, but she didn't seem to care.

Passing students looked on and murmured to each other, but Maina remained still, her dainty frame splayed out unmoving on the dingy tile, and her underpants exposed to the general public.

Kyousuke, coming to his senses, rushed over. “Hey! Are you all right? Can you get up?” As he tried to help her up, he also took a moment to fix her disarrayed clothing.

“Uggghhh…,” Maina groaned, showing some signs of life.

Kyousuke was momentarily relieved until the small girl burst into violent bawling. *C’mon, don’t cry now!* He rubbed the back of his head roughly, somewhat at a loss. “Uh… can you tell me where it hurts? I mean, if you’re hurt, I can take you to the infirmary. That is, if you can stand up. I mean, if not, I guess I could carry you…” As he placed one hand on her narrow shoulder, Maina stiffened sharply.

“Eee?! …Huh? Ah…s-sowwy. I’b fide now,” she sniffled, doing her best to wipe away the tears. Sluggishly, she rose from the floor, apparently unharmed. Nevertheless, she seemed to be greatly troubled.

“You wanna tell me what the hell happened?” Kyousuke demanded. “Did those bastards from our class try to pull something?”

“Hmm? O-oh…,” Maina replied. “N-no, id’s jus’ that th-th-th-the girl who k-killed six people suddenly called out to me. She said, ‘Do you wanna eat lunch together?’ B-but…but her eyes were really sharp and scary…I reflexively said, ‘I’m sorry,’ and she just looked at me even more sharply…I thought she might kill me, so—”

“…So you ran away, right? I see.” Kyousuke nodded with a bitter smile. He knew just how she felt. The Scarlet Slasher—Eiri—really did have a sinister air about her. Of course, her criminal record didn’t help with that impression, and when you found yourself caught in the gaze of those rust-red eyes, it felt like she was pointing a bloody knife right at you. Who wouldn’t feel like running?

Maina took out a light pink handkerchief and, burying her tear-streaked face in it, continued, "Oh…I don't know what I should do anymore… Everyone around me is such a scary person. I didn't come here because I wanted to, but why… It's cruel…it's too much…" She sunk back into whimpers and muffled sobbing.

Kyousuke let a hand fall on her shoulder. "I'm the same as you, Igarashi… I didn't come here of my own free will!" Lifting her face from the handkerchief, Maina looked at him with tear-filled eyes. "The people around me are all crazy murderers, and I don't know what I should do… But you're different! You're the same as me, a normal person. In other words, we're comrades. We're friends!" Kyousuke took Maina's hand and smiled.

"R-right! We're friends!" She clasped both of his hands in hers. "Finally…finally I found a normal person! Great…this is great…waah…waaaah!" Overcome with emotion, happy tears filled her eyes.

Kyousuke felt a sense of relief wash over him. *Finally! At least I've got one normal friend in this hellhole.* It was all he could do to keep from dancing on the spot. "Ha-ha. Well, wipe your tears, eh? Your eyes are probably so blurry that you can't even see right."

"…Eh? Oh yeah, I can't. *Sniffle*…I'll wipe them now! Yep, yep!" Maina let go of his hands and began dabbing her eyes with the handkerchief. The motion reminded Kyousuke of a small animal washing its face; he found it completely endearing. Maina was even more adorable up close. Kyousuke grew more and more ecstatic. Her cheeks looked luxuriantly soft.

"Okay! Once you're ready, let's go eat lunch! The cafeteria or the school store, which do you prefer, Maina? …Oh, excuse me. I called you by your first name! …Ah, but you can just

call me Kyousuke, all right? By the way, I don't have to tell you, but you're really cute, Maina! How should I put it, this… Do you want me to protect you? It feels like you'll never get out of here, right? If you're on board, how about we be good frien—"

"Eeeeeeeeek?! K-kakaka…kami…*Kamiya Kyoushukey?!* Ee…ee?! Aiiiiiiiiiii!!" Shrinking back quickly, Maina pointed a trembling finger at Kyousuke.

"What…?"

Her vision unclouded by tears, Maina had realized exactly with whom she was speaking. "Eeeeeeeeek?! D-d-don't kill…don't kill me, pleeeeeeeease! I'll do whatever you say! Please! Pleeease! Just spare my life! My liiiiiife!!" She collapsed on the linoleum floor in a ball, sobbing and shaking in abject terror.

Rushing over, Kyousuke put on his softest voice. "Oh no, you've got it wrong. I wasn't planning on killing you—I wasn't planning anything really! So please calm down, okay? I thought I told you before, I'm at my wits' end with all this, too, just like you. I'm stuck in here just the same, remember? You understand, right?"

"Um…yes," Maina squeaked. "I und-d-derstand; you haven't k-k-killed enough people to satisfy you yet, is that right?"

"Yeah, sure." Kyousuke rolled his eyes. "I killed twelve people all in one go, but you know what I was thinking?" His tone was more acrid than he'd intended. "I was wondering if I could kill even more next time! Yep, that's definitely it. But then I got arrested, what a pain! I'm just not satisfied at all… You've got it all wrooong!"

“Eeeeeek!! The mask came ooooooff!!”

“There’s no mask, it was a joke! And anyway, in the first place—”

*Killing twelve people was a false charge.*

A split second away from letting his secret slip, Kyousuke snapped his mouth shut. A number of other students, drawn by the commotion, had gathered in groups and were looking on discreetly. He couldn’t let them hear what he had to say; if Kyousuke wanted to explain things to Maina, they would have to find somewhere more private.

“Look, it’s complicated.” He extended a hand toward her trembling shoulder. “Why don’t we get out of here, eh? We kinda seem to have drawn a crowd…”

“What?! P-pwease don’t touch me! There’s no way I would go with you! *You’re a terrible criminal who killed twelve peeeeeeople!* Waaaaaaaaah!”

Maina turned and dashed away, tripping several times in the process, until still screaming, she disappeared around a corner. Her pink handkerchief, forgotten in the rush, fluttered to the ground as the sound of her frantic footsteps and crying voice faded with distance. The hallway sunk into a nervous silence, until…

“…Twelve people? He killed twelve people, that guy? …I-is this a joke?”

The hush broken, the corridor instantly filled with commotion as the other students chattered to one another in excitement.

“Twelve people?! Eh, is that… Really?! I thought he had a fiendish face, but…”

“He’s in Class A, that guy. Twelve people is really bad, right? I’m glad I’m in Class

B…"

"That many…amazing! I think he killed my heart, too. Oohh!"

"Wha—?! Calm down! Calm down, my left arm! …Ah, I know. We'll bury him. But it's not time yet. Be brave, be brave, Azrael!"

The clamor continued on and on, and Kyousuke found himself at his wits' end. *This is the worst…now everybody's heard the story! Not what I wanted at all! On the other hand… they seem kinda scared…scared of me.*

He snatched up the forgotten handkerchief and pressed a hand to his now-aching forehead. Maina's misunderstanding had not been unreasonable, but it did make things more difficult for him. The Warehouse Butcher had become a celebrity on campus. At least it might keep some of the lesser scumbags from messing with him.

"Hey! Hey, hey, just a secooond!" A pair of meaty hands clapped him on the shoulders.

*What the—?! Where the hell did they come from? But that voice…is that a girl…or a boy?*

"Hellooo. I'm talking to you! *Tsk.*"

Kyousuke turned to face an enormous girl dressed in gaudy street fashion standing before him. She must have been six feet tall, with shoulders almost half as wide, and her uniform had been cut and slashed in various places, likely to accommodate her colossal frame. From beneath choppy blond bangs cut straight across, the hulking creature gazed down at Kyousuke, the red tinge to her rough cheeks indicating exactly where her interests lay. She reminded him of that professional wrestler, Bob Sapp.

"…Eh?!" Kyousuke, completely at a loss for words, shrank away.

As he did, the Bob ●pp–looking girl with the bob haircut—he decided to name her "Bob"—stepped forward on two legs like tree trunks, closing the short distance between them. "What did you say your name was? If you like, you can become my frie—"

"I'll pass."

"Wha—?" Before she could grab him in her beefy arms, Kyousuke turned tail and ran, followed by her hoarse, flirtatious voice.

"Wait for meee! I didn't even get your naaame!"

# Brutal Under Ground

## BOY MEETS GAS MASK

SECOND PERIOD

**Q.** WHAT KIND OF LIVES DO THE STUDENTS LEAD AT PURGATORIUM REMEDIAL ACADEMY?

**A.** FUNDAMENTALLY, NO DIFFERENT FROM THOSE OF STUDENTS IN THE OUTSIDE WORLD. YOU COULD SAY THAT IT'S LIKE A SUBPAR BOARDING SCHOOL WHERE THE TEACHERS ARE DEVILISHLY STRICT. THEY EVEN HAVE WEEKENDS OFF, JUST LIKE USUAL. INSTEAD OF EXTRACURRICULARS OR CLUBS, THEY DO CORRECTIONAL DUTY, AND IF ANYONE BREAKS THE SCHOOL RULES, THEY'RE BEATEN HALF TO DEATH. TRY TO LEAVE THE SCHOOL GROUNDS, AND YOU'LL BE SHOT ON SIGHT... THERE ARE A NUMBER OF MINOR DIFFERENCES LIKE THAT.

# Brutal Under Ground

## BOY MEETS GAS MASK

## SECOND PERIOD

“Hey, did you hear? Someone said that there’s a guy in our first-year class who killed twelve people!”

“Twelve?! No way, I don’t believe it… He must be the top student this year, right?”

“Must be. I heard he did it all at once, too. On numbers alone, he doesn’t come anywhere close to the ‘Killer Queen,’ but Her Highness was a serial killer, so… When it comes to brutality, he might measure up, you think?”

“D-definitely…but isn’t she kind of old news? I mean, if we’re talking current events, he’s gotta be the most heinous killer around.”

Shut up inside a graffiti-covered stall, Kyousuke huddled on top of the toilet, gripping his knees. Tens of minutes had passed since he’d run away in a blind panic, eventually finding refuge in one of the new school building’s boys’ bathrooms. Since he’d taken up the hiding spot, most of the conversations taking place on the other side of the stall door had been rumors concerning Kyousuke. It seemed that his fame had spread even to the upper classes. On top of that, he’d just learned that there was apparently an older student who’d killed far

more than twelve people. Kyousuke's mood was on a rapid decline.

*...Man, I didn't even get a chance to grab any food, either. Talk about adding insult to injury.* Gripping the pretty pink handkerchief, Kyousuke held his hollow belly in an attempt to silence the grumbling. In the afternoon, he had the harsh correctional duty work to look forward to, on top of regular classes. How cruel with an empty stomach…

Suddenly he wondered—*What time is it right now, anyway?* Kurumiya's ferocious smiling face appeared in Kyousuke's mind. *If I'm not in my seat by the time class starts, I'll be "disciplined"...* The color rapidly drained from his face. *This is bad.*

Lunch break was only supposed to last one hour. He didn't have a watch, so Kyousuke didn't know the exact time, but his sense of panic began to spike with the fear that he might already be late. Around him, the restroom had fallen silent.

*Craaaaaaaap!! If I don't get back soon...* Throwing the stall door open, Kyousuke rushed into the deserted bathroom. Trying to keep low to the ground, he fell over midway toward the exit, then picked himself back up in a mad rush. Still pitched forward, he stumbled again, his momentum carrying him through the door and into—

"—Huh?"

Kyousuke's face met a soft and yielding surface that completely enveloped his field of vision. He could hear a cute muffled shriek of surprise as the indescribable feeling and sweet, perfumed scent surrounded him, and he thought for a moment—*This is bad*.

Kyousuke dropped to the floor of the hallway, as if to push the person he had run into down.

—Silence.

Kyousuke's face was still buried in a soft texture and a pleasant scent. It felt too nice, and Kyousuke, whose mind and body were completely exhausted, thought he might drift off to sleep right there. It was an escape from reality. *Ay-Ayaka. Big brother is too worn out already…*

Through his rapid fade from consciousness, Kyousuke heard a quiet voice coming from somewhere above him. "…Excuse me. Could you please move off of my chest now?" It was a girl's voice, a beautiful, soft soprano mumble.

At first, Kyousuke didn't understand the girl's words. A little too late, it hit him. *Chest… breasts? It's no wonder they're sof— Wait, craaap!!* Lifting his head and flying off of her, Kyousuke kneeled down on the ground and pressed his forehead to the ground in apology.

"Thank you for the meal! …Wait, that's not it!! Thank you so much! …Wait, that's still wrong!! I'm sorry! I'm so sorryyy!" Shaking with too much stimulation, Kyousuke fired off the wrong words in rapid succession. His face was so hot he thought it might catch fire. For the first time since coming to the institution, he really did want to die. "!" Kyousuke squeezed his eyes shut, preparing himself to be verbally abused as a "groper!" and "pervert."

"Hmm. Well, I guess I should say, 'You're welcome?'" replied a gentle voice above him. "How about you pick up your head? And maybe stand? It's bad manners to have a conversation while sitting in the hall, don't you think?"

Bewildered by the unexpected reaction, Kyousuke slowly opened his eyes. "…Huh? W-well…I guess…" The first thing his gaze fell upon was a pair of white indoor slippers. Then, two beautiful legs in striped tights. Following these great legs, not too fat or too

skinny, as they traced a beautiful upward line, Kyousuke came to a gray pleated skirt that had been cut short and straight on up to a narrow, nipped-in waist. A strange sound like "*Kksshh*" was coming from somewhere.

"My goodness! You came flying out of there so suddenly, you really startled me! You were in the bathroom for a long time, so I thought I'd come in and make sure everything was all right. But then you ran right into me… I'm just glad you weren't hurt. I suppose these big things can be useful after all!" The girl leaned back a little and crossed her arms, emphasizing her large breasts.

*Th-they're h-huge…!* The girl he had met earlier—Bob—her whole body barely fit into her uniform, but this girl was stretching hers out only across the chest. They were so big he wondered if she might have watermelons jammed in there. Beneath her open blazer, she wore a thin blue sweatshirt and a black tank top, drawing attention to her ample contours. *That's where my face was buried just a second ago? U-uh-oh…* Kyousuke found himself experiencing some localized tightness in his pants.

"Hey, did you hear me?" the girl was saying in a puzzled voice. "How long do you plan on sitting there?"

"Oh, eh…heh, that's, ummm…my bad…," Kyousuke stammered. "I seem to be a little excited for some reason. Eh-ha-ha…"

"'For some reason'? I don't get your meaning, but I'd be happy if it's because of me."

"Sorry. Could you wait just a little longer? I'll settle down soon, so, you know…"

"…Let you sit? Aww, I want you to stand up, though. So you're saying it's something along these lines: If you're 'standing at attention' for some reason, then that becomes a

reason why the rest of you can't stand up—is that right?"

"W-well, something like that, yeah…anyway, give me a minute."

"Hmm…in that case, there's nothing to be done, I suppose. You really persevere, even in this state!"

"Oh, thank you. I'll try to make it settle down as quickly as possible!"

*...What the hell is with this conversation? I feel so stupid I want to disappear.*

Kyousuke glanced up nonchalantly, trying to hide how worked up he was with these unpleasant feelings. His gaze finally fell on the girl's face to find—

*It was covered with a jet-black gas mask.*

"……Wha—? …I mean, aaaahhhh!!"

Kyousuke did a double take. *...It's not a hallucination.*

The girl's face was completely covered in a gas mask–like mask. Where the mouth would be, there was a cylindrical exhaust port that stuck out a good distance, and the eyes were covered by translucent plastic viewports. Silky silver hair spilled out of the gap between the mask and a dark hood that covered the back of her head. Even her ears were invisible under the cover of black headphone-like equipment.

From the exhaust port at the mouth of the gas mask a sound leaked out: *"Kksshh." Was that a sigh?* "My goodness. It's pretty rude to scream when you look at a girl's face, you know. Even if it is because you're surprised at my beauty! Really!"

"…B-beauty? I can't even see your face…!" *How am I supposed to tell how you look*

*under that weird mask? And who wouldn't be surprised to see something like that?* All day, Kyousuke had been dealing with almost every kind of freak, but on appearance alone, this girl was truly twisted.

Bob was beginning to look better and better. From the bottom of his heart, Kyousuke was sure, definitely sure this time, that he wanted nothing to do with this gas mask girl. She didn't seem to have the same idea.

"Oh, come to think of it, we haven't introduced ourselves yet. I'm Renko Hikawa. I'm a student in the first-year Class B. I've heard rumors about you. They're attributing twelve kills to you, is that right?"

Somehow this gas mask girl—Renko—had also picked up on the rumors about Kyousuke.

*"Attributing twelve kills"? What the heck does that imply?* He was staring right at Renko's face, but thanks to the gas mask, he couldn't read her expression. It looked like the viewports were tinted like sunglasses, so that he couldn't even see her eyes.

Kyousuke was lost in his confusion over how to react to her weirdness, when she said, "…Hmm? Come to think of it, lunchtime is over soon, isn't it? The teacher of our Class B is really strict about the time. I'm reluctant to part ways, but I do have to go." Though it was difficult to understand her muffled mumbling, Kyousuke could tell by her low tone that she really was regretful. "I do have one last request. If you don't mind, I'd like to know your name."

"My…name? You want my name? Well…" Kyousuke was in trouble yet again. After all, if Renko was a student here, there was no doubt that she was also a murderer. However kind

she might seem, it would be dangerous to imprudently get entangled with her. But on the other hand…

"I don't mind if you find telling me disagreeable. I won't blame you—in fact I'll silently, obediently leave. But after I do, there's a chance I may have a big crying fit while still wearing my mask and willfully drown in my own tears… But there's no need for you to worry about me. So please don't exert yourself on my account. I mean, do whatever you like…it doesn't matter whether I live or die…"

"…Hey. That wouldn't be a threat, would it?"

"No way, not at all. It's not a threat. It's a joke, silly. Think about it sensibly, and you'll realize you can't drown in your own tears, see? Do you think that I usually cry when I get rejected by a boy like you? But I'm totally choked up at your naïveté, taking a joke so seriously."

"…I see. Well, good-bye."

Pitiful sobs rose up from behind the gas mask.

"You're really crying?! H-hey!"

"*Sniff*… My allergies have been really bad lately."

"No, no, you're lying, Gas Mask. That mask is one of the most impenetrable things I've ever seen, but…"

"You're right. I may have been too overbearing just now, as usual. *Kksshh*."

*I bet that "*Kksssh*" was her laughing.*

Sighing, Kyousuke stood. By all rights, he wanted to run as fast as he could, but— *She could be a problem, this Gas Mask; she's way too easy to trust.*

Contrary to her sinister outer appearance, her demeanor was gentle and calm, and she somehow exuded an innocent, friendly aura that he found impossible to dislike. Kyousuke found himself torn. *Do I dare get involved with Renko?*

Kyousuke, contemplating this dilemma with his hand on his chin, was startled when Renko spoke up. "Okay! I've got it. You seem to be having trouble deciding, so there's no helping it…I'm taking it off."

"Huh…taking it off? You're going to take it off for me?!" Astonished at this inconceivable proposal, Kyousuke tried to look at Renko's face, only to be met by an enormous black gas mask that nodded vigorously.

"Yeah, I'll take it off. It's called a show of good faith. Right?"

"Uh…r-right. I think that sounds about right." *What a surprise. In spite of being a murderer, she's surprisingly sincere.* Even as he wondered at the disparity between her appearance and her demeanor, Kyousuke felt his pulse quicken.

"Umm, well…I-I'm taking it off! This is embarrassing, but I'll endure it with all my might!"

"O-okay!" His voice cracked with nervousness. He gulped.

In the quiet, Renko first removed her sweatshirt hood. Her long, silky, silver hair spilled out over her shoulders, filling the air with the sweet smell of her shampoo.

After that, she slowly pulled the front zipper down, opening the sweatshirt completely. Her chest, which strained the thin fabric of her shirt, swayed gently, looking soft. Next, she went ahead and grabbed the hem of her tank top with both hands, and when she started to lift it up, resolving herself—

"Hey, hey! Wait a second, will you? What do you think you're doing?"

Renko tilted her head in confusion at Kyousuke's interruption. Her skin was so pale it was almost transparent. Her tank top was rolled up as high as the bottom of her breasts, exposing her thin waist and small belly button. A thin border of black lace peeked out from beneath the hem of her shirt. Kyousuke stood still, stiff in every sense of the word. "What do you mean? I'm taking them off. *You know, my clothes*. The mask is really a pain to remove, so please forgive me if I just strip down… I-is that no good? Didn't think so! Well, then, next is—"

"…Kyousuke Kamiya."

"Hmm? *Kyousukekamiya?* What's that? Some kind of new slang?"

"It's Japanese! You said you wanted to know my name! First-year, Class A, Kyousuke Kamiya."

"……Huh?"

Judging from Renko's befuddled response, Kyousuke had thrown her off-balance. *I thought for sure she meant she would take off her gas mask… That was misleading.*

"First of all, put your clothes back on. Like that, you're, how do I say it…too tempting."

"You want me to put my clothes back? Oh, really? I thought surely you must be interested in my breasts, but maybe I was wrong? And here I was thinking that even if you hadn't told me you wanted to see them, I would let you touch them as much as you wanted…but it looks like there's no need for that."

"Wha—?" *In my fifteen years on this earth, I have never regretted a decision so much in my life.* "I mean…sorry. The truth is, that was a fake name just now."

“What did you saaayyy?! Before telling that bald-faced lie, didn’t you want to do things with my body?! I see, so your interest is so low…” She saw straight through Kyousuke’s shameful lie.

*Correction. In my fifteen years on this earth, now I have never regretted a decision so much in my life.*

“…Well, enough of that. I wonder if we’re okay on time, Kyousuke? Personally, I think we’re in a lot of trouble. The Class B teacher is an awful pervert, so if you’re even one second late, he makes you do this and that and even the other thing…”

Informed of this gut-wrenching fact, Kyousuke’s heart skipped a beat. In shock, he looked at Renko’s chest—no, at her face. “This and that?! You don’t mean…no way! We’ve gotta hurry back! Maybe that’s as far as it goes in your class, but in my class, I’ll be beaten to death, you know!!”

“W-wait a sec!! I don’t want to be made to do those sorts of things…it’s totally grooosss!”

“I asked you before, what are those thiiiiiingsss?!”

Kyousuke ran for his life toward the classroom. Renko followed, lagging behind.

The speaker hanging in the hallway shook as the chime began to sound.

X X X

“I know I told you, you little worm! If you aren’t in your seat by the start of class, you’ll be disciplined…that’s what I said. Have you prepared yourself, I wonder? Heh-heh-heh…”

Kurumiya's sadistic laugh rang out in the classroom that had fallen silent. Absently fiddling with her iron pipe, she slowly stepped down from the podium. "You maggots were probably thinking: *Oh, if I'm only a second late…* or *Oh, if something happened, and it was out of my control…* or even *Oh, since it's only the first day…*," Kurumiya continued. "Surely she'll *have* to overlook it! That's what you thought, isn't it? Well, my response is—"

Kurumiya stopped walking and stood silent for a moment. It was a heavy quiet filled with sadistic intentions, tense like the drawing of a bow and arrow. The tension and fear in the room grew deafening, and just when it was about to peak—Kurumiya snapped. *"Hell no!"*

From the back corner of the room, a confused shriek filled the room, along with the crash of Kurumiya's target falling over, chair and all.

The atmosphere in the classroom remained tense, not a single student daring to move or make a sound, lest they incur their teacher's wrath. Kyousuke shrunk in his chair, the most nervous of them all. He had reached his seat mere seconds before class had begun.

"Really, this year's class is getting some terrible marks, isn't it? Hmm?!" *Krak.* "Having to discipline two of you on the very first day is…well?!" *Krak.* "Mohawk this morning and now you… Just because I'm a pretty girl, you think you can take me lightly? Still don't take me seriously? I'll grind up the two of you together like raw meeeeaaaaat!!" *Krak. Krak. Krak. Crunch!*

"Eeek!" "She's really not a little girl—!" "Wha—?!" "Gyaaahhh!!"

Abusive language, the sound of blows, harsh cries, and the spatter of spurting blood together formed a violent quartet.

Sitting ramrod straight, his unmoving gaze fixed directly ahead, Kyousuke shook like a

rattle. *That was really close! If I hadn't made it in time…that could have been me!* He exhaled sharply in a mix of fear and slight relief. *I wonder if Renko made it in time?*

In his mad rush to get to class, Kyousuke had lost track of Renko somewhere behind him in the hallway. He had no idea how she'd ended up, but considering that he'd just barely made it himself, then almost certainly…

*Don't tell me that right now she's in the middle of being made to do this thing and that thing and the other thing?! In front of her classmates, those boobs… Shit!! No, Kyousuke, don't imagine it! But then again, I'm interested. I'm definitely interested… No, wait! She's just in the next-door classroom, so if I listen carefully, I can probably hear someth—*

"Hey, Kamiya, what are you smirking at, you bastard? Do you enjoy it that much when your classmates are being disciplined? Hmm…I see. As expected, you're rotten to the core."

"…Huh? Wh-what is it?" Kyousuke's consciousness had slipped through the wall and taken a trip to a delusional world, and he was brought back to reality by Kurumiya's growling voice. He gaped in the shock of the transition.

By the time he came to his senses, Kurumiya, who had long since finished with the "discipline," had shouldered the blood-spattered pipe and was looking down at Kyousuke from the lectern with an icy glare.

"…Hmm? Did you say, 'What is it?' To *me*? That's a fine way to behave in class for someone who intentionally took his seat only moments before we started! You must *really* want to be disciplined."

"Eh? W-wait, please! That's not what I mea—"

"…Oh? Then, what did you mean? Why did you have such a joyful look on your face?

I'm just dying to hear, so please explain. And before you do that, stand up."

"E-explain?! I mean, if I could just stay seated…"

"I won't allow it. I thought I told you that I will absolutely not allow back talk? Are you making fun of me?"

"N-no, ma'mb…sorryeh…ugu!! I understanmb…ndu!!" Kyousuke nodded in assent, even with Kurumiya reaching down from her post to tortuously grind the end of the bloody iron pipe into his cheek.

*…Wh-what the hell is this! Even if I try to avert my eyes, her iron pipe comes after me. Is she going to beat me? Hit me with the pipe and then lick up the blood? I underestimated her after all. It's like a bad joke.*

*The timing couldn't be worse, dammit… How am I supposed to explain this?*

Of course, there was no way that he could honestly confess that "I suddenly broke into a grin imagining that a girl from Class B who I just met was being made to do this and that as her punishment for being late to class. My apologies," nor continue on to honestly say that "Because of that I am not standing, but I am indeed erect," absolutely not. Forget being "disciplined," she'd beat him to death.

However, since Eiri was beside him to the left, if he were to stand up, the fact that he was hard would be obvious to her. And it just so happened that, at this one moment of all moments, she was not fiddling with her manicure, but instead watching him with puzzled eyes, waiting to see what he would do. On the other hand, embarrassment and humiliation was still preferable to death by blunt force trauma.

Resolving himself to the inevitable scorn and disgust of his female classmates, Kyousuke

slowly, resignedly stood—

"Aaah!! Not *that*…n-noooooo!!"

From the other side of the classroom wall, a coquettish voice belonging to someone in Class B cried out suddenly.

*...Wha—? That high-pitched voice...it c-couldn't be...her?!* "Little Kyousuke," who had just been starting to quiet down, suddenly got his energy back. Kyousuke reflexively lowered himself back down into his seat.

"…I see. I totally understand, Kamiya. That's your choice, is it?" Reaching the limit of her patience, Kurumiya once again descended from the lectern. Tossing the crushed iron pipe aside, she pulled new ones out from somewhere. *There are two pipes now.* Carrying a deadly weapon in each hand, Kurumiya drew closer to Kyousuke.

*Oh God... Am I going to get beaten down like that asshole earlier? But there's no helping it... Renko's also receiving her punishment, so I, too... What is this crap? And here I had decided I wasn't going to let myself get killed.*

Wiping the blood around his mouth away, even as he steeled his innermost thoughts, Kyousuke couldn't stop shaking.

Kurumiya stood in front of his desk. A pair of eyes housing an agitated light stared down Kyousuke head-on.

"…Any last words?"

Surrounded by a haze of anger, Kurumiya raised her deadly weapons.

In his terror, Kyousuke couldn't move a muscle. Wordlessly looking down, he clenched his teeth.

"Hmm…I see. In that case, I'll send you to the next life right no—"

"Yoo-hoo! I'm back from the shores of the River Styx, little miss! Gya-ha-ha!"

The door at the front of the classroom was thrown off its hinges as a lone male student came crashing in. Trampling over the broken door, raising his voice in loud, raucous laughter, was—

"…Mohawk," Kurumiya snarled. "You came back already, you bastard? I guess I didn't punish you enough!" Sticking out from the mummy-like bandages that covered the intruder's head was his bright red Mohawk.

Kurumiya's attention had turned away from Kyousuke with the flashy return of the student who had, just earlier that day, been dragged to the school infirmary. A thick vein bulged on her temple as she turned about to face Mohawk. "…We are in the middle of class, you know. In addition, that door…are you making fun of me? Hmm?! I'll send you straight back to hell if you keep screwing around! Unfortunately for you, I'm in a bad mood right now… You might be injured, but I won't go easy on you! Hope you're ready!"

Recoiling for a moment from the bloodthirsty glint in Kurumiya's eyes, Mohawk quickly regathered his courage and raised his voice in unpleasant laughter. "Gya-ha-ha-ha! Is that so? Well, fine by me! I ain't gonna take it easy on ya this time, either, little miss! I'm gonna shred that stumpy little body of yours! I'm gonna put all my strength into it! Ready or not,

here I come! Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Stumpy? Stumpy?! Why you little…!" Kurumiya's expression grew cold as she stepped toward the still-laughing Mohawk. "…I'll teach you a lesson from the underworld. The pigs who have called me 'stumpy' or 'pip-squeak' or 'kiddo' or 'kindergartner'…they're all dead now."

It seemed that Kurumiya, whose eyes now bulged with bloody rage, had entirely forgotten about Kyousuke.

"*Fwah*... That's great, isn't it, Kyousuke?" yawned Eiri from beside him. "You're saved."

*Saved? I've just got a stay of execution is all…*

However, because of Mohawk's clumsy provocation, Kurumiya's temper was getting worse and worse. An aura of dark bloodlust radiated about her. Mohawk, who was facing her down, should have been shaking in terror, but—

"Gya-ha-ha-ha! Is that so, little miss stumpy kindergartner? Or was that elementary schooler? You're too shrimpy, so that's my mistake! Sooo sowwy."

"…WHAT?!"

Every student in the room got goose bumps at the same time.

They all stared at their reckless classmate with expressions of utter shock.

Only Eiri offered a quiet comment. "…He's a dead man."

Kurumiya's shoulders, which had been rigid and tight, began to tremble like Maina's. "Ha…ha-ha-ha-ha…fwa…fwa-ha-ha-ha… HAA-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Her voice grew loud as she broke into frantic laughter, holding her stomach.

Perhaps put at ease by Kurumiya's laugh, Mohawk also opened his mouth wide. "Gya-ha…gya-ha-ha-ha! GYA-ha-ha-ha-HA-HA!" For a short moment, the two of them laughed like good friends.

"Well, that was a good laugh," Kurumiya eventually said. "Hee-hee-hee…it's been a long time since someone made me laugh like that." Wiping away the slight tears that had welled up in her eyes, Kurumiya dropped her iron pipes. Approaching Mohawk, she stretched up on her toes and placed both hands on his shoulders, her smile falling away.

*"—Do you want to be beaten to death ten million times over?"*

With all her strength, she wrenched his shoulders out of their sockets.

"Gyeaaaaaahhhhhhh!!"

Kicking Mohawk with her heel and stamping down on top of him as he fainted from the pain, Kurumiya surveyed the classroom.

"Listen up, you maggots. For your first afternoon lesson, I was planning a nice little tour of the grounds and an introduction to the facilities. Too bad that had to go and change, hmm? No worries, though, I've got a great demonstration of *numerous* bare-handed torture techniques lined up instead! Well, then, let's begin with the extremities, eh? Starting with the fingernails—"

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"…And finally, we get to the scalp. Oh, would you look at that! It seems like I got a little bit too engrossed in my demonstration. If you ask me, we've still got quite a bit of ground to cover, but…hmm… Well, we'll just have to leave it at this for today. After all, I am a busy lady. I can't just play around with you scum all day." Wiping her blood-soaked hands on Mohawk's jacket, Kurumiya, who had carried out the sadistic lesson with frightening enthusiasm, looked tired.

Flinging the filthy blazer aside, she took a few idle golf swings with the iron pipe at the pixelated mass lying on the floor—the shuddering wreck that had been Mohawk. Once his eyes had rolled back and he'd stopped moving, she finally turned away, allowing the medical team waiting on standby to scoop the unrecognizable figure onto a stretcher and shuffle him away.

"…Well, then. It is now four o'clock. Class time will be over before you know it. Change your clothes and assemble on the sports field by six o'clock. From there, you'll do physical labor until nightfall. Healthy minds dwell in healthy bodies…so instead of extracurricular activities, you'll work correctional duty twice a day, morning and night. Be sure to attend! Strict punctuality is expected. Got it?"

In response to Kurumiya's words, the class collectively responded in an energetic voice, "Yes, ma'am!" The hellish torture show had planted a sense of terrified loyalty in every one of them.

"Heh-heh-heh…good answer. Well, then, see you later." Nodding in satisfaction, she took her pile of handouts under one arm. "…Hmm? I feel like I'm forgetting something important, but…oh well. Right now, I feel like going straight back to the staff room and having a drink.

I think I'll go for a milk shake and egg shortbread cookies."

*Did she say milk shake and egg shortbread cookies? That's strangely cute.*

"…No, wait a second. I can't discount the chocolate chip cookies…hmm, hmm…" Thinking with her chin in her hand, Kurumiya left the classroom.

"I-I'm s-saaaaaaved!" Kyousuke shouted as soon as she was gone, throwing himself down over his desk. His whole body felt weak. "That's what they call a narrow escape… I thought I was done for."

The "something important" that Kurumiya had forgotten was, of course, Kyousuke's "discipline." After watching her demonstrate so many cruel methods of torment, one after the other, with no other thought than that he was next, Kyousuke finally took a moment to relax.

"…Isn't that great, Kyousuke? You were saved by that birdbrain."

"Yeah, you're right…I'm still alive now thanks to him." Kyousuke almost felt like he should have some words of gratitude toward Mohawk, who had unknowingly helped him out of his predicament. *Farewell, Mohawk, thank you, Mohawk. At least, rest in peace…*

"…Well? What are you planning to do now, Kyousuke?" asked Eiri.

Kyousuke leaned forward and thought about it. "Now? Well, come to think of it, it's after school right? I wonder…" After the end of fifth period, they had a full two hours before manual labor began. Each student was free to spend this rest time as they liked. As long as they assembled on time and in their work jerseys, no one cared where they went or what they did. Kyousuke had a hard time imagining what to do with his free time.

"…Say, isn't that the guy? The butcher who killed twelve people?"

An unfamiliar male voice spoke from the hallway.

Kyousuke felt the blood drain from his face as the corridor erupted into noise. *I've got a bad feeling about this.* He turned to face the door.

"Huh?! Look at his eyes…so intense! I thought my heart was gonna stop just now!"

"Hey, I told you not to do that! You'll be killed! Come here and kneel down with a mind to die!!"

"You mean, *he*'s responsible for that pool of blood? And the door's busted in, too…"

"Aah, how cool…I want to kill him. And then eat him…I'll make a stew."

"No! The one who's going to take him down and eat him is me! ME! My left arm, Azrael, is throbbing, Kyousuke Kamiya… It's saying, 'I want to kill you, I want to eat you.'"

"……Seriously?" Kyousuke was stunned.

Students who had heard the rumors about Kyousuke were gathered in the hallway, peering into the classroom through the open door and gaps in the iron lattice. The narrow hallway looked like a packed train, with bustling people clamoring for space.

The whole of their collective gaze was fixated on Kyousuke alone, like a great weight bearing down on him.

"…Isn't that great, Kyousuke? You're famous," Eiri nonchalantly remarked. There was little call for congratulations.

At her desk behind Eiri, holding her head with her eyes shut tight, Maina repeated a handful of words in her infantile voice, fumbling over the syllables again and again. "I pray that the world would become a peaceful place, I pray that the world wud becomba beashful blaesh, I bway dat—" It was because of the earlier incident with her in the hallway that so

many other students were now gathered.

Kyousuke wanted to clear up the misunderstanding with her as quickly as possible, but he couldn't afford to make a clumsy move. *Oh, man, what should I do? ...This is a no-win situation, isn't it?*

The students in the hallway remained outside, watching. Not even one of them had made a move to enter the classroom or start up a conversation. Were they afraid of Kyousuke? Or were they holding one another back…?

He wanted to make a break for it, but with the hallway so crowded, he wouldn't make it ten feet. Kyousuke had stiffened, his skin clammy with nerves.

"Ummmm, is Kyousuke in here? Kyousuke, Kyousuke, oh, there you are."

From out of the crowd, a black gas mask suddenly appeared. Pushing the other students aside with a polite "excuse me, please" or a "could I just get by," Renko made her way into the classroom. Paying no mind to the stares that surrounded her, she strode boldly up to Kyousuke.

"Well, I haven't seen you since lunchtime! Say, did you manage to make it to class on time? *Kksshh.*"

"Um, uh…I just barely made it…but…" In response to Renko's cheerful greeting, Kyousuke lowered his voice in a hush.

The loudly clamoring students all shut up at once and strained their ears to hear Kyousuke and Renko's conversation. The sudden silence was intensely uncomfortable.

However, Renko didn't seem to think so and continued the conversation unbothered by the audience.

"Hmm. That's nice isn't it, you made it. '…But'? What did you mean by 'but'?"

"Ah, nothing…just that in your case, you…"

"Oh, right… Unfortunately, I was about ten seconds late, so—" Renko sighed with a "*kksshh*." Kyousuke gasped and swallowed hard. In his head, the girl's voice that he had heard during class was endlessly repeating. "The teacher showed up about twenty seconds late. So I was saved!"

"Oh, that's really too bad. …Wait, what? You were safe?"

*Strange—that screaming voice…was I hearing things?*

"Yeah. But there was a girl who showed up about a minute late. Poor thing…she fell victim to *that*. You know that girl, the one who's almost as wide as she is tall."

"What…did you say?"

An auditory hallucination would have been a hundred times better. While he had imagined Renko('s breasts) taking the punishment for being late, it turned out that what had been going on on the other side of the wall was anything but arousing.

*I wish I could just disappear; I wish someone would bury me.*

"It looked like she was caught up in searching for someone. Seems like she was late because of that. She must be in the infirmary now, but…the person she was searching for, wasn't that you?"

"…It was completely unwanted, but you're probably right. I really had no idea." Kyousuke groaned, head in hands. "This is the worst, shit…Bob hasn't given up on me yet."

"…Isn't is great, Kyousuke? You're so popular," Eiri nonchalantly added.

Before Kyousuke could turn to meet her scornful gaze, Renko tilted her head with a "hmm?" and looked at Eiri who had again begun fiddling with her nails.

"A friend of Kyousuke's? How do you do? I'm Renko Hikawa from the first-year Class B. I'm actually sixteen, though…"

"…What does that mean, 'actually,' when we can't even see your face?" Eiri replied, refusing to play the straight man to Renko's comedian and ignoring the hand extended in friendship. "…Anyway, I'm Eiri." Painting on a topcoat to put the finishing touches on her nails, she returned a short introduction.

After staring for a second, Renko nodded and meekly retracted her hand. "Ah, sorry, sorry. I wasn't paying attention. What was I thinking, going for a handshake with you when you're working on those things…*kksshh*. My field of vision is a bit narrow because of the mask."

"... *'Those things'*? What do you mean by that?" Lifting her face, Eiri looked at Renko's gas mask with suspicious eyes.

"Hmm? No, it's just that I think your nails are really cool. They're hard not to notice, though."

"……Oh, right. Being effortlessly fashionable is the foundation of womanhood and all that." Eiri shrugged her shoulders at Renko's carefree words and returned to her nail art. Her nails were beautiful, with rhinestone and Swarovski crystal ornamentation on top of a base of red manicure, and the pointed tips were bordered in black. Looking at them, it was obvious that they'd been done with some skill.

"*Kksshh.* Right, right, fashion is girls' specialty, isn't it! By the way, Kyousuke—"

"Hmm? What are you saying? For your information, your gas mask is not even close to fashionable," Eiri tried to respond.

"Right. About lunch tomorrow," Renko continued. *She just let the fashion thing go so smoothly.* "Why don't we eat together? I'd like to have a chance to actually talk with you. I wanted to talk to you after school, but…this commotion in the hallway started, you know. What do you say?"

"Lunch tomorrow? Ah…sorry, Renko. I eat by mysel—"

"If you want, I'll let you touch as much as you please," Renko interrupted.

"As much as I please?! When you say 'as much as you please,' do you really mean that?!"

"Sure. You can satisfy yourself to your heart's content touching the smooth material of the mask."

"…Oh, is that what you meant?! It's pretty confusing, you know, the way you said it…" Having stood up with a clatter, Kyousuke sorrowfully returned to his seat.

Eiri turned her tepid gaze toward him. "…Huh? What did you think she meant, pervert? Gross."

Looking at Eiri as she glared at him and called him names, Kyousuke realized—*I see. Her chest is completely flat*—compared to Renko's huge, protruding breasts, Eiri was utterly, perfectly flat.

"…Where are you looking? Do you want me to lop it off for you?"

"What about you, where are *you* looking?! And don't say scary things like 'lop it off'!"

"…Whatever. Anyway, it's just a little cocktail wiener, so who cares?"

"No way! Maybe you couldn't call it a bratwurst, but at least a sausage—"

Their voices got louder and louder, but then Kyousuke quickly bit his tongue.

He could hear the voices of the students in the hallway and classroom whispering, "… Sausage?" "He said sausage!" Kyousuke had the sudden urge to repeatedly smash his head into the wall.

Renko took a long breath with a *kksshh*.

"What made you two start such a delicious talk all of a sudden? I think it's great, though…looks like you're getting along! I'd like to be part of it, too—oh, I know!"

Clapping both hands together, Renko made her voice and her huge breasts bounce.

"How about if Eiri joins us for lunch tomorrow, too? Meeting like this was an opportunity of some sort! …Right? Don't you think that's a good idea? *Kksshh.*"

Eiri faltered, faced with Renko's massive swaying breasts in addition to her innocent demeanor, which did not at all match her outward appearance. She turned away as if looking for some escape and, not finding any, said with resigned acceptance: "W-well…why not? I don't really mind, not really…"

"Hey, Kyousuke. Isn't that great?!" Renko cheered. "Wooow, I'm looking forward to tomorrow's lunch so much!"

"Yeah, it's great…," Kyousuke began to reply before catching himself. "Ah, hold on a minute there! I don't remember saying that I was gonna go yet?"

"What? You're not going to come? …Why not? Boohoo."

"Who actually says the word *boohoo*? And as for why not, well—" Put on the spot for an acceptable excuse, Kyousuke found himself at a loss. Of course, his actual reason was that

he was not a murderer, but an ordinary teenager, and though it might have been the truth, there was no way he could tell them that.

*On the other hand, it's not like I can expect to be left alone to leisurely eat my lunch…* Looking at the students swarming at the front of the room, Kyousuke found himself in a difficult position.

The gleaming gazes of high school murderers. It would have been better if they were only looks of fear and admiration, but mixed in among those were expressions of jealousy and hostility and, even more upsetting, faces beaming with homicidal intent.

By all means, he had to avoid being drawn into any kind of situation with those freaks. Surely, his life was in danger. If he was alone, he could end up being killed carelessly. And given that, then it would be better to—

"…Fine. I'll go. I'll go, too." Kyousuke nodded, his heart and mind set on self-preservation.

The real top killer of Class A, who had cut the throats of six people, and Gas Mask Girl, who was maybe the strangest person he ever could have imagined. It was hard to envision a more troublesome lot than these two; though if he could somehow manage to befriend them, it could be beneficial…or so Kyousuke thought.

"Ah, really?! Yaaay! I'm so happy. Tomorrow's gonna be a party! *Kksshh.*"

"…So after all that, you end up coming after all. Indecisive asshole."

Renko bubbled with joy at Kyousuke's response, while Eiri's expression remained relaxed and cold.

They weren't friends. They were just allies—a means to survive.

Kyousuke decided he'd throw his lot in with these two girls.

X X X

The Purgatorium Remedial Academy was a boarding school. It had to be, to prevent escape and keep the students isolated from the outside world. Established for the purpose of "rehabilitating underage murderers," Purgatorium Remedial, unsurprisingly, differed from other institutions of its kind in several key regards.

For example, near the concrete wall and fence that fully encircled the grounds, guards maintained a twenty-four-hour watch, and nobody questioned their authority to use deadly force if necessary. Such measures almost seemed unnecessary, however, as the entire campus was situated on a solitary island surrounded by miles of ocean, making escape a practical impossibility.

Purgatorium Remedial could hardly be compared to a normal prison. And yet even so, the students' freedom was recognized to a surprising degree within the grounds. At times it was hard to tell whether the place was particularly strict or particularly lenient.

In the first place, it was beyond puzzling that a detention center built exclusively for underage murderers even existed. Facilities for housing underage criminals made sense, but why on earth would there be one *only for murderers*? The orientation had been notably unclear on that detail.

"Well, I can think about it until my brain turns to mush…but I'm tired."

Kyousuke was completely exhausted, both body and soul, after finishing the rigorous manual labor; for a full four hours, he had weeded the farm fields, repaired the school buildings, carried raw materials, and so on, and so on, all the while being selectively harassed by Kurumiya.

He tossed away the handouts that had been distributed during orientation and threw himself down on the simple frame bed that was provided for him. The mattress was thin and patchy, promising an uncomfortable night's sleep.

Over the window, through which he could see the deep blue night sky, were thick iron bars as wide as the ones in the school building. One wall of his room was made of the same bars and locked shut from the outside. There was not much other furniture in the narrow, bare concrete apartment, just a desk and chair and a small shelf and, in the corner, a western-style toilet. It looked like it belonged in a prison rather than a student dormitory.

"I'm supposed to spend three years in a place like this? They've got to be kidding me…" Kyousuke wore a jersey with a black border on a white background. *It really is a prisoner-chic design. It suits murderers so well. However—*

"I've never killed. I've never killed anyone…I think." As soon as the words left his mouth, an anger that he couldn't control began to boil to the surface. Though it had only been a moment, Kyousuke was angry at his own weakness in doubting his innocence, even in the face of this absurd situation.

"Aagh, shit! I didn't deserve this…so why…" Molten rage smoldered in the bottom of his gut. Enduring it with gritted teeth, Kyousuke tossed and turned. He had asked himself this same question a thousand times between his arrest and placement here.

*Why. Why. Why. Why— No answer comes.*

The promise of more manual labor waited him again early the next morning. When he closed his eyelids, intending to get some sleep, what came floating up behind them was his most important family member's face.

*...Ayaka.*

Whenever he thought of the little sister from whom he had been separated, a deep crack worked its way through his heart.

*I wonder how Ayaka's doing right now?*

The expression on Ayaka's face the last time he had seen her was seared into his mind.

Since being dragged away by the detectives on that day, Kyousuke had hardly been allowed to see his sister at all. Like a surge of progressive waves, he had been moved from jail to detention center, and his trial was conducted, all while he had no idea what was going on— By the time he had come to his senses, he had already been moved into this school.

But still, what was his sister doing…? If he thought about it, he could easily imagine.

Kyousuke had been through so much, but Ayaka was the one who was really hurt. *Ayaka's feelings are hurt, and she's probably crying.* Kyousuke could easily imagine his little sister in her dimly lit room, wearing a bath towel over her head, holding her knees, body shaking, stifling her sobs.

Long ago, Kyousuke had found her like that almost every night, a result of the terrible bullying she received in elementary school.

"…I'm sorry."

Seeing his normally cheerful little sister like that, Kyousuke had decided that he would

become stronger than anyone else. He sought out the strength to protect her so that Ayaka would never again be hurt, never again be sad.

Since then, there had been times when he caused Ayaka to worry, but she had never been hurt by bullies and never been sad.

*Or at least she wasn't supposed to be.* In spite of that, Kyousuke had…

*It's just as Ayaka said. I was always doing idiotic things, and so I got wrapped up in something I couldn't come back from, didn't I? I'm so sorry I'm such a stupid older brother. But…*

He clenched his fists on top of the bed, illuminated by the pale light coming in through the window.

*…Not yet. It's not all over yet.*

If he could manage to "graduate" safely, he should be able to go back outside.

If he did that, he would be able to see Ayaka. He could protect Ayaka.

He could apologize to Ayaka.

That's why—

*No matter what happens, I'm going to endure it… Everyone around me may be a murderer, but whether I have to stare down that demon of a teacher or be thrown in lockdown, no matter what…I'm going to survive.*

# Destructive Hurricane

## CALAMITIES CAUSED BY THE CLUMSIEST GIRL

THIRD PERIOD

**Q.** WHAT DO THE STUDENTS DO ON CORRECTIONAL DUTY?

**A.** IN SHORT, CHORES AND ODD JOBS. CLEANING AND REPAIRING THE SCHOOL BUILDINGS, PUTTING WEED KILLER IN THE FLOWER BEDS ON SCHOOL GROUNDS—ANYTHING FROM CULTIVATING THE FARM FIELDS TO MASSAGING THEIR INSTRUCTORS' SHOULDERS, REALLY...BASICALLY, A VARIETY OF TASKS ACCORDING TO THE TIME AND PLACE, AND TO THE MOOD OF THE PERSON OVERSEEING THE STUDENTS. IN ADDITION, DURING CORRECTIONAL DUTY, STUDENTS MUST GET PERMISSION FOR EVERY SINGLE LITTLE THING. DRINKING WATER OR WASHING THEIR HANDS OR USING THE BATHROOM... IF THEY DO ANYTHING WITHOUT PERMISSION, THEY ARE DISCIPLINED ON THE SPOT!

# Destructive Hurricane

## CALAMITIES CAUSED BY THE CLUMSIEST GIRL

## THIRD PERIOD

“I’m gonna d-die… If it keep ups like this, I’ll die.” First period had just ended, and as soon as Kurumiya left the classroom, Kyousuke had fallen flat on his desk.

With her head propped up on one arm and her legs crossed, Eiri let out a carefree sigh. Kyousuke turned his head and, with his cheek on the desktop, stared intently at her profile. “Hey, Eiri… How come you get away with that attitude all the time? Even in front of that demon of a teacher.”

“…No reason. She just doesn’t pay attention to me is all. Not like you and Mohawk.” Eiri’s tone was blunt as she turned her gaze toward Kyousuke—and the desk to his right.

Fresh blood was still dripping from the desk, which had been broken clean in half.

Their classmate with the Mohawk hair, who had been sitting there before the start of class, was gone. He’d picked a fight with Kurumiya first thing in the morning, when he said, “You’re looking tiny and cute today as well, aren’chu! Gya-ha-ha!” It had taken all of two seconds for Kurumiya to wipe the floor with him again, but thanks to his provocation, the teacher’s mood had turned foul. On the receiving end of that temper were Mohawk’s other

classmates (mainly Kyousuke).

"It doesn't make sense… Why would she pick on me alone during the morality lesson?" Kyousuke lamented. "It was totally unreasonable of her to say stuff like 'Hey, Kamiya. Put me back in a good mood. Make me laugh.' I don't know what she meant by that. Plus, she got violent if I started to bore her…and morality lessons are bullshit anyway."

"…Well, whatever. At least you made her laugh a little bit."

"It was a scornful laugh, though, wasn't it? That atmosphere was so traumatic, I mean really…" As soon as the words left his mouth, he was reminded of the chilly atmosphere in the classroom earlier, and he grew more and more dejected.

Earlier, Kyousuke had done a spur-of-the-moment impression of a worker at a Much Burger restaurant in a desperate bid to lift Kurumiya's mood.

"Oh, a phone call! You've reached Much Burger, thank you muchly for calling!"

*Kill me now.* …In the dead silence following his impression, only Maina had been kind enough to chuckle, "Thank you muchly…hee-hee."

The only reason Kyousuke had survived the ordeal was that Maina had laughed.

Suddenly, Kyousuke remembered that he had something he had to give back to Maina. *I also need to clear up that misunderstanding from earlier, so I'd better hurry up and talk to…huh?* As Kyousuke, checking his pocket for the handkerchief, rose from his desk, he noticed that Maina was not in her seat.

Finding this strange, he looked around. There she was. Hunching her small body over, she was trying to leave quietly out the door in the front of the classroom, without drawing attention to herself. And it seemed like Kyousuke wasn't the only one who noticed her

behavior.

"…They're watching her, aren't they?" Eiri muttered in a low voice. Kyousuke frowned silently. The three boys who had been leaning against the wall chatting—Shinji, Usami, and Oonogi—left the classroom one by one, following Maina.

Shinji was the leader. The necrophiliac "strangler," who had killed two girls with his bare hands, laughed with narrowed eyes, licking his lips like a poisonous snake hunting its prey.

"Ah…this is no good," Kyousuke mumbled. "I'm stepping out for a bit." His hesitation was only momentary. Before he could get the words out, his body had begun moving of its own accord.

Eiri watched Kyousuke stand and kick his chair back. "…Hmm? That's a surprise. Are you going to save her? Or to join in the fun?"

"Don't be an idiot," Kyousuke scoffed. "Of course, I'm going to help her. How could I ignore something like this?"

"…Huh? Well, aren't you kind, Kyousuke—for a murderer who killed twelve people."

"Sh-shut up…I can be kind, too, you know!"

Eiri pointed at Kyousuke with one manicured fingernail. "I understand how you feel… If you hadn't gone, I would have." She spoke so low it sounded as though she were talking to herself.

Kyousuke's eyebrows raised in surprise. "If I hadn't gone…just what do you mean, Eiri?"

"…It's nothing," she replied tersely. "Anyway, shouldn't you get going? You'll lose sight

of them soon."

"Ah, crap!! I'm off to help…peaceably, if possible."

"…Peaceably? Well, whatever… Try your best not to get killed."

With a send-off wave from Eiri, Kyousuke hustled out of the classroom. Her final words still rang around in his head. He was afraid of that all-too-likely scenario and did not have a reply.

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"Eeeeeeeeeeek!!" A cornered shriek reached Kyousuke's ears as he hurried down the stairs. *Maina?! Those bastards made their move too quickly!* As Kyousuke finished his descent to the first floor, he hung back for a moment, waiting to assess the situation.

Maina was completely surrounded in front of the girls' bathroom. The boys who had followed Maina were Shinji, the weird hunchback boy, and the older boy with dreadlocks and sunglasses—the three of them were there, fanned out around her.

Kyousuke didn't detect any other human presence. Most of the other students were likely still in class.

"W-wwwwh-wwhat do you want?!" Maina stammered, trembling. "Please don't come any closer to me! If you do, I'll do it! The p-poweesh… Police! I'ww call dem!!"

Shinji laughed cruelly as he backed Maina up against the wall. "Hey, hey. You don't have to be afraid! We're not going to cause you any harm. We just want to talk a little bit. In any case, even if you called them, the 'poweesh' wouldn't come."

"Wha…? Pwease don' make fun ub me…"

Oonogi with his dreadlocked hair snickered at Maina, whose lowered face was bright red with shame. "Psh. You fumble yer words too much! Besides, even if ya weren't shaking like a leaf, we still wouldn't wanna do anything nasty to you here…so pwease rewax! Ha-ha-ha! …Isn't that right, Shinji?"

"Yes, of course not. We don't have any plans to do those sorts of things to you anytime soon, Miss Maina. We're kindhearted guys, you know. In fact, we ought to take our time and get to know each other really well, don't you think?"

"Hee-hee…," giggled Usami. "…Striped panties, striped panties…white and blue…hee-hee-hee…"

Looking at each other, the three male students laughed. Their vulgar intentions were transparently obvious.

The hunchback Usami had lowered his awkward body down on all fours, brazenly peering up under Maina's skirt. With her eyes squeezed tightly shut, she didn't notice at all.

*So the school-issued underpants don't just come in black and white, there's a blue-striped pattern as well, huh…? Wait, who cares about that?! Go help her quickly, Kyousuke Kamiya!*

Getting his head back on straight, Kyousuke took a deep breath. He formed a fist and hardened his resolve.

Then, jamming his hands into his pants pockets, he assumed a casual demeanor and stepped out around the corner.

"…So then, Miss Maina. For now, would you eat lunch today with us—" Shinji was

saying.

"Huh? Oh, Shinji!" Kyousuke interrupted loudly. "What a coincidence! What could you be up to, eh?" He raised a hand in a stiff greeting.

"What the—?" Shinji's face, which turned at Kyousuke's words, was hideous. Only one of his bloodshot eyes was open wide, and his mouth was crooked. As soon as he recognized Kyousuke, however, his murderous expression quickly morphed into a friendly, disarming smile. "Oh-ho. If it isn't Mr. Kamiya? What brings you around?"

"Ah, well…nothing special! The bathroom upstairs was crowded, so…y'know… Ha-ha-ha-ha…" Kyousuke, shuddering at Shinji's sudden metamorphosis, forced a laugh. *For a second there, he really looked like he was going to kill me.* Cold sweat rolled down his back.

"Ah, I see. Except during lunch, the one here on the first floor is empty."

"…That's what I thought. Anyway, what are you guys doing here?" Kyousuke asked, trying to steady the beginnings of a tremble.

Past the boys, he could see Maina, still shaky and tearful, but he deliberately pretended to ignore her.

Oonogi spoke up, smacking his lips. "Tch…like that's any concern of yours? D'ya think you can act all cocky just because ya killed twelve people?! Listen up, shithead, hurry up, take yer shit, and scram."

It seemed that Dreadlocks had it in for Kyousuke. He slid his sunglasses down and glared at Kyousuke over the rims. He had the same stench as Mohawk.

With a gesture, Shinji pacified Oonogi, who nevertheless continued to eye Kyousuke up

and down as though he were going to make a move at any moment.

"My apologies, Mr. Kamiya. It's because all of us are but humble killers… We couldn't help but grow jealous of you, someone who's so popular among both boys and girls, on top of having a twelve-person kill count. Heh-heh."

"O-oh…is that so? That's my fault, I didn't mean to upset you." *Give me a break, I never wanted to inspire that kind of jealousy.* If he'd had any say, he wouldn't stand for it, but Kyousuke resisted making a show of his true feelings and forced a smile instead.

"Hee-hee…little, round, adorable butt, white thighs…hee-hee…" Only Usami continued to entirely ignore Kyousuke's very existence, instead focusing entirely on examining the space under Maina's skirt from a variety of angles. In some ways, he was the most frightening one. *He's really lost it.*

"Ah!" Just then, Maina, who had been hanging her head, opened her eyes wide in apparent terror.

Shaking with fear and anxiety, staring out into space, she saw Kyousuke. In a flash, her flax-colored eyes opened wide.

Trying to reassure the startled girl, Kyousuke summoned the most cheerful voice he could manage. "Geez, Maina! This is the second time we've met like this, isn't it? Speaking of which, I have the handkerchief you dropped the last time we talked, so—"

"Eeeeeeeeeee!! K-kkk…Kyo…Kyoshkeeyy Kamiya?! H…huh?! Eeeeeeeeeee!!"

"…Uh, yeah. That's what I thought."

Maina bumped into the wall as she tried to shrink away. Pointing a shaking finger at Kyousuke, her face was filled with fear and shock, her speech as incomprehensible as last time. “Wh-wh-wh-wh-why’re youhere…oh?! I-I knowhy! You orderb allub dis din’chu? You gabe yer underlindgs orders, andden you’ll takeid frum here, is datit?! H-how scawwy…” Stumbling over every syllable, it was nearly impossible to make out even a single word of what she was saying.

“Underlings?! Who is whose underling, huh?!” sharp-eared Oonogi shouted.

Maina, now even more frightened, looked like she was going to faint. She held her head with both hands and teetered, sobbing. Kyousuke tried again to reassure her. “Calm down, Maina! I’m not friends with these guys, it’s just a coincidence—”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!” Maina shrieked, crossed her arms, and took off in a dash. Using her small stature skillfully, she slipped past Kyousuke’s flank and tried to run away as fast as her legs could carry her.

“Hey, you, wait up!!”

Responding right away, Oonogi grabbed Maina’s arm and stopped her.

“Whooooooaaaaaa?!”

Maina, her feet tangled up in one another, fell flat on the floor dramatically, with great force. Then—

“Wha—?! Uwaaaaaaahhhhhh!!”

Maina put the force of her fall to use, and Oonogi, who had been gripping her wrist, *was*

*thrown clear overhead*.

Having been thrown flying, his body glided through the air at a height almost grazing the ceiling, and he landed headfirst in the hallway about five meters away. "Whaaa—?!" *Crack.* His head made an inauspicious noise upon impact.

"……Wha—?"

*What was that, just now?*

Kyousuke was of course taken aback, as were Shinji and Usami.

*That must have been a coincidence? Or did she do it on purpose? ...I don't get it.*

Cutting loose with enough force to throw a person flying—no, letting go at the precise moment to make someone go flying, whether by coincidence or on purpose, would be absurd.

"……Uh."

Maina, who was lying prostrate in the hall, lifted her face and looked at Oonogi, who had fallen faceup. "…Ah…ah…ah, aahhh……" Staring at the silent, unmoving boy, she began trembling slightly. "Aaaaaahhhh!! A-again…I've killed agaaain!! A-a-a-are you okaaaaaayyyy?! Waaah!" Clearly at the end of her rope, Maina managed to skitter and stumble over to where Oonogi lay.

Dreadlocks regained his senses with a groan, somehow still alive. As he began to pick himself up, he noticed Maina approaching, and for a moment their eyes met.

Maina's face suddenly brightened. "Huh?! G-great! You're ali— Whoooaaa!" At that moment, her legs gave out on her again, and she pitched forward, falling dramatically. As she did, her elbow, which had by chance been sticking out, landed squarely on Oonogi's

stomach in a magnificent elbow drop.

Despite her small size, it seemed the running start had afforded Maina's maneuver a lot of power. Foam flying from his mouth and the whites of his eyes showing, Oonogi was completely unable to move this time.

*No, wait. That had to have been on purpose.* Kyousuke couldn't help but think so, but if it had been, Maina was acting very strangely. She had immediately gotten up and was now running circles around Oonogi, looking extremely dismayed.

"Aaaaaahhh!! Wh-wwwh-whatdoido?! I did it again, I killed again… Waaahhh! Uumm, um— Whoooaaa!!"

"Huh?!"

*She fell over again.* Continuing what her elbow had started, Maina's knee slammed into Oonogi's crotch. Dragged screaming back to consciousness, Oonogi writhed in pain.

"Eeeeeek! C-calm down…I hab to cawm down! Whack and whack, like making mochi… noooooo!! Oh no, oh no, if they find me like this again…" The flustered Maina grew more and more panicked in front of Oonogi, who was fainting in agony.

"Whoa!!" "Augh!!" "Whoa!!" "Guuh!!" "Whoa!!" "Uyaa!!"

She fell; she smashed him with an elbow. She fell; she kicked him with a knee. She fell; she performed a perfect cross chop… She delivered a perfect series of violent attacks, all without any obvious malicious intent.

Maina's face was streaming with tears as she stood up and then slipped and fell down again and again. She had a look of fretfulness, confusion, and fear—an expression of absolute panic.

"Hee-hee…that's no good, clumsy girl…punish, punish…Heh-heh-heh…" Usami was the only one who moved, as Kyousuke and Shinji stood together, paralyzed.

Maina stood up after concluding her eighth round of attacks, and Usami closed in on her, nearly crawling on the ground.

While he wriggled the fingers on both of his hands restlessly, he approached her in a flash.

Noticing Usami drawing nearer, Maina shrieked. "Eee?! S-something's coming over heeeeeere!!" Flustered, she continued to stammer. "Ah, um…w-well…uh…uummm…"

"H-hee-hee…peel off the panties, make her naked, and then, with the skin…Hee-hee-hee…"

"I…I'm sowwy I exist!"

"Whaa—?!"

*Konk!* Maina's head, which she hurled downward after a long windup, smashed into Usami's face. Spewing blood from his nose, Usami collapsed in a heap. The white bits sent scattering about must have been his teeth.

Maina on the other hand seemed to be completely unharmed and was running around in a frenzy. She was an unbelievable blockhead. And then, of course, as she was rushing around…

"Whoooaaa!!"

"Gyah!!"

Fortunately, Usami also fell prey to her clumsiness.

"Whoa!!" "Gya!!" "Whoa!!" "Gyaha!!" "Whoa!!" "Gyooh!!"

Over the sounds of Maina and Usami's alternating screams, Shinji posed a question. "Hey, Mr. Kamiya…what the hell is going on?"

"What the— You think I have any idea?!"

As Kyousuke and Shinji watched in fear and astonishment, Maina rose shakily to her feet. It had probably happened when she struck Usami in the nose: Maina's whole top half, from her cheeks to her chest, was soaked with sticky red blood. Tears fell in fat drops from her wide eyes as she sobbed.

"Aaa…I killed again, I killed again…waa…hic. What do I do, whatdoido, watdoido, waddoidooo… Uuhh, uh…aaa…a…"

Her spaced-out gaze finally landed on Kyousuke and Shinji, her tear-filled eyes calling to mind an abandoned puppy. Like a drowning man grasping at straws, Maina stretched her arms out toward the two. "Waah!! D-don't come near me! Waaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!"

Shinji turned and ran. The vicious murderer who had strangled two girls ran away without hesitation.

"……Aah." Maina suddenly stopped moving. Her body even ceased shaking. Only her eyes, overflowing with tears and open as wide as possible, were trembling.

"M-Maina…?"

"…For once, it was good that they had the wrong impression of me." Kyousuke had been about to speak up, when Maina began to mumble faintly. Teardrops fell onto her cheeks, distorted with self-deprecating laughter. "Everyone around me is a murderer or worse, and I feared them, avoided them, hated them… I'm an idiot. I felt that way even though I myself am

an accomplished murderer. Even though I'm the very kind of person who should be feared, avoided, hated… I really am an idiot. No matter how much time passes, this is what I am, what I will always be…"

"H-hey…are you okay? First of all, calm dow—"

"Don't come near meeeeee!!" As soon as Kyousuke began moving toward her, Maina raised her voice in a shout. Shutting her eyes and holding her head, she seemed weak, about to crumble.

"Please don't come near me…I don't want to hurt anyone else…I don't want to lose anyone else. More than enough people have *died because of my clumsiness*…I'm sorry… I'm so sorry I was ever born…" She lapsed into tears.

Unable to find the right words, Kyousuke stood and said nothing. The chime indicating the end of the break period resounded through the hallway where Maina sobbed alone.

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"…Hey, you bastards. Are you ready for your trip to hell?"

A few minutes had passed, and Kyousuke was worrying over whether he should say something to Maina, who had so far shown no signs of crying herself out, when the last voice he ever wanted to hear echoed loudly through the hallway. Maina had her face covered with both hands, but her body shuddered.

"…Five. Do you know what that number means? It's the number of times in the last two days that I've had to really discipline someone. Now, that was mostly that annoying Mohawk, but…I swear, you all are giving me so much trouble! How far will you have to push me before you're satisfied? Huh?!"

"No, miss, that's not it!" Kyousuke answered in a rush. "This is—" Just as he was about to look back at the scene behind him, something bright red brushed against his cheek.

Whatever it was that Kurumiya had lobbed at him with one hand, it traced a gentle parabola—passing in front of Maina, and between Oonogi and Usami, before it landed with a thud.

It was a young man, covered in blood from head to toe.

It was Shinji "reformed" and almost unrecognizable.

"……Wha—? Ah… E-eeeeeek!!" Catching a glimpse of Shinji's battered form was

enough to send Maina into a full-speed retreat. Scooting back across the floor, she slid past Kyousuke in an instant.

"Hey, stop right there. Where are you going? You can't escape!" Kurumiya shouted after her.

"Eeek!! S-ssssososo-sowwyyy!!" As Maina tried to slip past her evil teacher, Kurumiya caught her by the scruff of the neck and hoisted her upward. In her other hand she held the blood-soaked iron pipe.

"Eeek!! Forgibe me! F-forgi— Waaaaaahhh!!" Maina, now in a complete panic, thrashed her dainty arms and legs, struggling for dear life.

"—Shut up!" Kurumiya roared, a bloodthirsty expression painted across her face. "Do you want me to XXX you in your XXX?" She readied the iron pipe, and Maina instantly quieted down, dangling like a dead fish with a blank look in her eyes.

*Blurting out things like "XXX" and "XXX" in that Lolita voice, Miss Kurumiya is really something else!*

"…Hmph. Igarashi, I'll hear a detailed report from you in the discipline room. It appears that you were the one who caused this mess, isn't that right? Though I beat the basic outline of the situation out of this Saotome asshole I caught in the hallway over there. Oh, and by the way…"

Kurumiya glared at Kyousuke.

"Why the hell are *you* here, Kamiya? Were you the leader? …Tch, typical. Well, that's just fine. Come with us to the discipline room. You seem like you're really underestimating me anyway, so…I'll take this opportunity to really, truly discipline you. This time, for sure,

you won't escape!"

"…Ah."

Kyousuke clenched his teeth and held back the objection that only made it as far as his throat. *If she says I'm the ringleader, then I guess I must be the ringleader.* It was due to his intrusion that Maina, who had been at her wits' end to begin with, had gone even further over the edge and all hell had broken loose. If he was to be punished for that, then there was no helping it. He took a moment to strengthen his resolve before answering. "…I understand. Just, well, it's only my first time, so…please be gentle."

"Sure, leave it to me. With such an engaging quarry, I'll really do a thorough job."

"Wha—?"

There was no use arguing, so Kyousuke refused to bother. Dragging Maina along with one hand, Kurumiya approached him. She flung aside the iron pipe, and just before she could grab Kyousuke by the hair with her newly free hand—

"Pwease wait, Miss Kurumiya!" Maina mustered up her voice and shouted in protest. Kurumiya paused as Maina babbled on in her incoherent, infantile speech. "Kyo-Kyousuke had nuffing to do widdit! He just happened to pass by by coincidence… I was caught up in some trouble, so he… I'm telling you, Kyousuke had nuffing to do widdit!"

"…Maina?"

Without meaning to, Kyousuke looked at Maina's face. Maina, who was being dragged along by the scruff of her neck, had done her best to speak up for him, meeting Kurumiya's scornful gaze with dignified eyes.

"…I see. In other words, this was all your fault! In that case, I'll need to make your

punishment even more severe, for causing Kamiya trouble… No complaints, right, Igarashi?"

"Uhm…n-no complainds! I'm…I'm prepared!"

"Oh, is that so? …Hmph. Okay, then. In that case, I'll be rough with you, just as you wish."

"But…h-hey!! Wait a second, Maina—" Kyousuke's raised voice was cut off by Maina's powerful eyes. Her eyes, staring directly at him, communicated clearly what her silent lips did not. *I told you to shut up* is what they said.

"I am totally prepared…because the whole thing was my fault." Wiping her tears and the remaining blood from her cheeks, Maina actually smiled weakly. Self-deprecation and resignation showed on her all-too-frail face.

In contrast with her steady eyes, her facial expression had changed faster than Kyousuke could open his mouth.

"…That's just fine. In that case, why don't you show me your resolve?" Kurumiya replied. "We'll take our time and do it right, hmm? …Heh-heh-heh. Well, then, Kamiya. You go back to the classroom. It's study hall."

"Study hall? What on earth am I supposed to do in study hall—?"

"*Nothing!* If you cause any more problems today, I'll break in every single one of you. My stress level is already approaching the limit… For now, I'm going to take it all out on this one. Come here!"

"Eh?! M-mmm-me?! N…noooooo!!"

Turning on her heel, Kurumiya disappeared farther into the school building, dragging

Maina along.

The medical team was on the scene before he knew it, lifting the injured boys lying in the corridor onto stretchers. As they carried them away with a "heave-ho," Kyousuke stood in shock.

He silently gripped the handkerchief that he had missed his chance to return.

X X X

"…Maina."

It was lunchtime. Kyousuke had resolved to speak with Maina, who had just returned a moment ago.

Sitting in her seat, staring blankly out into space, Maina…

"—"

…was unresponsive. She'd been burned completely out.

She wore her school jersey, and despite the bandages and gauze taped to her cheeks, didn't seem to have suffered any major physical injuries. It seemed like her wounds were mental.

"I'm sorry for being born. I was possessed by my secret power. I can never be someone's bride. Stop already! Maina's nothing but a tattered rag!" She went on and on, deliriously muttering to herself with empty eyes.

*...I wonder what happened to her in that discipline room?* Worried as he was, Kyousuke decided to try a different approach. Placing a hand on Maina's shoulder, he spoke

again, this time in his best impression of an angry Kurumiya. “Hey, you! I’m gonna discipline you!”

Maina jumped with a start. “Eee?! S-sss-sowwy! Besides what I already told you, I… huh?” In a moment, she’d come to her senses. Her eyes met Kyousuke’s, and as soon as she realized that he was not Kurumiya, her whole body relaxed a bit. However, her face immediately stiffened up, and she brushed away Kyousuke’s hand.

“I told you not to come near me! And please don’t touch me… I’ll hurt you, too, you know! Maybe I…I might even kill you! So please don’t come near me. Don’t come talk to me! Just like everyone else…”

The rest of the class surrounded them at a generous distance, leerily watching Maina shake with her arms wrapped around herself.

Not a single person tried to approach her.

Operating with little, if any, control on Maina’s part, her destructive clumsiness was something like a bomb with an unpredictable fuse. It was the kind of thing you’d want to avoid if possible. Even Kyousuke had to agree, but even so…

“Look here, this…this is something you dropped, isn’t it?” Trying to look nonchalant, he held the pink handkerchief in an outstretched hand.

Maina’s eyes opened wide in surprise. She timidly took the handkerchief with both hands and, after giving it a thorough examination, looked up at Kyousuke questioningly.

Looking back at Maina with her head tilted sweetly in puzzlement, Kyousuke laughed. “Well, then, thank you for earlier! For protecting me from Kurumiya. You really saved my ass!”

"Huh?! Ah, well…it was my fault from the beginning, so… I didn't really p-protect you…" The cheek against which she was holding the handkerchief was slightly flushed, the same pink color as the cloth.

Kyousuke decided to broach the real issue at hand, as he took in this charming view of Maina. "However you want to think about it is fine. The fact is that I was saved because of you. So, well…to say thanks, let me treat you to a meal. It's lunchtime now, so how about it?"

He had said "treat," but in reality they were on a meal ticket exchange system. At any rate, that was the usual means of getting food.

"Huh? Lunch…? B-but, I'm…um, well…"

"Come on, you don't have to worry about your clumsiness. I may not look it, but I *am* the vicious murderer at the top of the class. I won't be killed that easily. Or is it me that you find disagreeable? Eating a meal with a murderer like me?"

Maina choked out an "…uhm" in response.

Right now, Maina was disgusted less with the students around her and more with the idea that she herself was a "murderer," and Kyousuke turned that to his advantage. Though he was aware that it was unfair to ask her such a thing, knowing she couldn't deny it.

The fact was, Maina, who he had cornered with his request, was panicking, whimpering like she was in trouble.

*She's probably fine, though. She did this once before, and just earlier she acted the same way, too.* When she said, "Don't come near me," Maina had seemed very lonely, very bitter… The truth had been evident: If she had the choice, she would rather be with people.

*Of course she would.* Naturally, she was frightened, having been thrown into a place like this. Anybody would be scared. Aside from occasionally killing people with her clumsiness, Maina was a perfectly normal girl!

"Say, Maina. Why don't you eat with us today? You didn't eat properly yesterday, either, did you? I can't let you go on like that every day."

"Whaa—?! Wh-why do you…?"

"Why? …Does it frighten you? Everyone around you is a murderer. You never know when a girl like you might be attacked. But with me, the top of the class, by your side, those other guys will think twice about even getting near you, won't they? Surely you can relax better that way?"

Maina's gaze drifted toward Kyousuke, who was grinning. "B-but…um…what if—if you attack me, what'll I—"

"You don't have to worry about that." Unexpectedly, Eiri cut in. Looking over from her seat, she continued, "Because if he does try anything, I'll…cut him to ribbons for you."

"Where are you—?! You glanced down there just now, didn't you? You definitely looked!!"

"…Shut up. If you keep acting so annoying, I'll make sure to slice it on an angle, real thin. Like you would with a burdock root."

"It's not that narrow! Even so, slicing…it shrunk up just imagining that!!"

"…Sure it did. Though I'm sure it's hard to tell, in your case."

"What do you mean 'in my case'?! You've never even seen it, so what the hell do you know? I'm suing you for slander, bitch!"

"…Is that so? If you do that, I'm raising sexual harassment charges. 'He forced me to look at things I didn't want to see'—that's what I'll say. They'll cut your little mushroom off and throw it away."

"They'll do no such thiiingg!! What the hell, it's getting smaller and smaller thanks to you!"

"…Say, Maina." Leaving the incensed Kyousuke to fume, Eiri turned her gaze toward Maina. She glared with half-open eyes, her usual nasty murderous expression.

Sure enough, Maina let out an "eeek!!" and began shaking in earnest.

"What's with that reaction…? You did the same thing yesterday at lunchtime, didn't you? I don't get what you mean by it." Sulking, Eiri stuck her lip out like she was pouting.

*Come to think of it, Eiri invited Maina to lunch yesterday, didn't she?* She had probably been thinking that since they were both girls, and since their seats were right next to each other, she ought to make some effort to be sociable.

Eiri looked disgusted at Maina's obvious fear. "…Well? Are you coming or aren't you? Which is it?"

"Whaa…? U-umm…I'm, uh…"

"Hey, Maina… Do you have any feelings of guilt about your crime? If so, why not consider this part of your punishment and come with us." Eiri's voice was smooth and distant, as usual.

Her forceful words had an effect and delivered a decisive blow. "Punishment…th-that's right. Okay…since you put it that way, I'll come with you." Maina nodded assent, though she still seemed a bit confused. "…Yes, I understand."

Seeing this, Eiri's cheeks slackened a little. Her rust-red eyes even seemed a little happy. But when she realized Kyousuke was looking at her, she immediately returned to her usual sour look. "Hmph…well, let's get going, then. People are waiting on you." She turned away in irritation, rising quickly from her seat.

X X X

The cafeteria, which was only about the size of two classrooms, was crowded with students. There was a thuggish older boy with tattoos on his arms and an honest-looking youth in black-rimmed glasses. There was a girl with richly colored streaks in her hair and another who was as wide as she was tall, wearing a bob haircut, looking like Bob ●pp— "Wha —?!" He hid, fearing for his life.

"…Just a second. What do you think you're doing all of a sudden?" Eiri demanded.

"Hmm? Oh, sorry…there's someone I would really rather not meet face-to-face."

"…Is that so? You've made that many enemies since entering school here?" she remarked. "It's tough being the famous guy at the top of the class, huh?"

While Kyousuke was hiding behind Eiri, Bob leisurely left the cafeteria. Having escaped from any immediate danger, he pulled himself together and took a look around.

"Okay, then, wellll… Doesn't look like she's here—hey, ow, stop hitting me!"

They easily found the person they were looking for. Holding their trays, they headed straight for her. Loitering near a four-person table next to the window was a girl in a black gas mask. Even among the crowd of lunatics and murderers, she still managed to stand out.

“Hey, Renko!” Kyousuke called. “Sorry we’re running late.”

“……”

There was no response.

Fixing his eyes on Renko’s unmoving profile, Kyousuke cocked his head in confusion. If he strained his ears, he could hear from the gas mask—no, from the black headphones to the sides of it—some kind of *shkshkshkshk* noise leaking out. Perhaps she was listening to music or something. He put a hand on her shoulder, drawing her attention.

“Hmm? Oh, if it isn’t Kyousuke,” she responded. “Sorry, sorry. I couldn’t hear you over my music blasting.” Aware now of Kyousuke and the others, Renko felt around for the headphone controls. The *shkshkshk* faded, growing gradually quieter until before long it was inaudible.

“No, that’s fine, but…by the way, what kind of music are you listening to?”

“The music I’m listening to?” Renko replied. “It’s basically hardcore. GMK48 and stuff like that. It’s a forty-eight-person band whose members all wear gas masks. Their sound is impressively heavy.”

“Must be…it’s a band, right? What instruments do they use?”

“Guitars and bass and drums and percussion and a sampler. And they have one vocalist.”

“One?! Only one vocalist among that many members?! They must get drowned out by all the noise, for sure!”

“*Kksshh*... Don’t underrate me, Kyousuke. Surely I don’t have such a weak voice that I would be drowned out by a musical performance of, at most, forty-seven people? How rude, really!”

"O-oh, is that how it is…? Sorry…wait, what? Hold on a second. From the way you said that, it sounded like you were the vocalist for that band, but…? Hey—!"

*—shkshkshkshk*

"Don't go back to blasting it! C'mon, cut it off."

"No way!" Renko shook her head. "If I'm not constantly listening to music, I can't compose myself. While I'm chatting, while I'm eating, during class…it's 'no music, no life.' *Kksshh.*"

"Huh. Well, could you maybe turn it down a little? What a music lover you are…"

"…On the other hand, you're 'no gas mask, no life,' aren't you?" Eiri cut in, speaking nonchalantly and coldly in place of Kyousuke, who knitted his eyebrows.

Receiving this sharp, cutting jab, Renko raised her voice. "…Oh, Eiri! That reminds me, you're here today, too! Whoa, it's been so long since I ate a meal with somebody, I'm really in high spirits! Oh…by the way, who may I ask is that girl?" Pointing to Kyousuke's side, Renko cocked her gas mask curiously.

"Eeek?!" Maina shrieked and clung to Kyousuke's arm. The two arms holding him tightly had a soft, gentle feel to them but, despite their small size, also seemed quite solid.

Squeezing him tight, Maina's teeth chattered loudly. "Her f-ffff-fface is mechanical looking! Is she a robot?!"

"Correct. You have found me out. That is exactly the case. I am a robot. Originally I was a beautiful young girl, but my body was used as a plaything for an evil secret society that did this and that, and finally in the end, I was demonically remodeled and turned into a slaughter machine, a tragic heroine! I can also shoot a charged particle beam from my boobs."

*The hell they do! Who would believe a story like that?*

"Whaaaaaat?! Is that true?! A-amazing…"

*She believed it like it was totally normal.*

Eyeing Renko enviously, Maina continued, "Your mask certainly seems to be packed with all kinds of features, doesn't it? Like energy generators and stuff. It's so big…and even though your head is hard from being turned into a machine, the rest of your body looks so soft…huh?" She blinked in surprise and wonder, as if she was looking at something marvelous.

"Geez, it's not her face, it's a gas mask…," Kyousuke huffed. "She's wearing it, silly."

Indifferent to the whole situation, Eiri also gave a monotone "that's right" and promptly sat down. …It was easy to guess what was on her mind.

Looking sidelong at Eiri's flat-as-an-iron-cooktop chest, Kyousuke took his seat as well, in front of Renko. Maina hesitated, then took the last remaining seat—she slowly sat down on Kyousuke's right side.

And then as soon as everyone was seated, Renko began talking to Maina, who was diagonally across from her. "We haven't introduced ourselves yet, have we? Nice to meet you, I'm Renko Hikawa! I'm a student in the first-year Class B. My most attractive features are my big eyes and long eyelashes, my nice nose, and my sexy lips."

"Ah, right! Um…I'm Maina Igarashi. N-nice to meetchu…" Maina's gaze only lifted briefly to nervously flit around the table.

Watching Maina for a little while, Renko wordlessly fixed her eyes on Kyousuke.

"__"

Her facial expression was hidden by the gas mask, so he had no idea at all what she was trying to convey.

"…Uh, what is it, Renko? It's kinda scary when you stare at me without saying anything, you know."

"My most attractive features are my big eyes and long eyelashes, my nice nose, and my sexy lips…that's the truth."

"Right, I heard you. I was just gonna let it go, but I'm kind of at a loss since you repeated yourself. Do you need attention?"

"Don't hold back! If it's you, Kyousuke, I won't mind even if you really dig into me…"

"Don't say 'dig into me' when you're squirming like that. If you tempt me too much, you might really get what you're asking for."

"Okay, sure…come on! Only I don't want it to hurt too much. Be gentle—"

"I told you to *stop talking like that*!" Standing, he shouted back at her.

Sitting diagonally across from him, Eiri let out a "…hmm?" deliberately loud enough for him to hear. "…Is this a couples' comedy act? How intimate. Looks like we're in the way here." After spitting this out, she picked up her chopsticks and lifted what looked like vegetable stir-fry to her mouth. She frowned. "…Gross." Obviously annoyed, she took a sip of what looked like miso soup. "…This is gross, too." Her sculpted eyebrows rose higher and higher in building anger.

She was already pissed thanks to the "daily special garbage meal set" she had ordered off the signboard menu in the cafeteria, so before Eiri's temper could get any worse, Kyousuke waved his hands in a panic.

"There's no way you could be in the way, Eiri! Whenever you're around, how do I say it, um…the mood tenses up, I mean, the feelings of tension, sense of urgency, feelings of oppression, and so on, relentlessly, um…"

"Right. You're really not doing yourself any favors there," Renko remarked.

"Shut up, Gas Mask. You're not helping me out here, either. Don't attack your own side, fool."

"Yeah, you're right. I'm not the straight man, I'm the fool—in other words, I'm pretty sure I'm the one who's supposed to take it all."

"Why did you have to go and rephrase it like that?! You just wanted to say you're the one who gets fucked, you perverted gas mask!" Kyousuke cried.

"…Well. As I thought, it's time to head back."

"Wha—?! Wait, wait, Eiri!" Renko pleaded. "We've just barely begun to get to know each other! I want to become friends with you. Don't go…please! That's what I want, really!" She squeezed her breasts together as she begged Eiri, who was half-standing with her tray in her hand to stay. Using both hands to push the heavy right and left bulges together in the center, Renko bowed her head.

*What the hell is this?! I thought you're supposed to clap your* hands *together when you make a request!*

"……Uh."

However, Renko's approach appeared to be extremely effective. Looking down at her, Eiri's cheek twitched. She was at a loss for words, mentally comparing her own completely flat chest with Renko's boosted boobs.

"O-okay I get it… They're great if you have them, but only if…hmm."

She sat down with a thump, as if crumbling.

Renko embraced Eiri, who was staring at her own chest, retracting from the attention.

"Yay, thank you, Eiri! I won't part from you again. *Kksshh.*"

"…Wha—? You're heavy, don't hang on me. They're touching me, those useless fat bags!" Pushing aside the gas mask with her elbow, Eiri scowled with annoyance at Renko's chest.

Renko theatrically took her head in her hands, feigning shock at the rejection. With a *kksshh*, she dropped her shoulders slowly and mumbled like she was really disappointed. "And here I thought the two of us could develop beautiful breasts— I mean, a beautiful love together…but alas, I am scorned. My chest heaves with sadness…*sniffle*…"

Eiri was looking more and more bloodthirsty.

Without even giving Eiri time to make a comeback, Renko quickly looked up and continued, "However, I am not discouraged! Because when I make a sad face, the people around me also start to feel gloomy…I smile even in bitter times. If I've got a brightly smiling face, everyone else smiles, too, every time. That's what I believe…" Pressing her hands together as if in prayer, Renko delivered her speech with passion.

*No one can see your face thanks to the gas mask, though. Without facial expressions, your words are meaningless.* Kyousuke really wanted to quip back at her with something like that, but restrained himself, partly because it seemed like he might once again get caught up in Renko's weird way of doing things. *Plus, I don't want to provoke Eiri any further.*

Kyousuke stayed quiet and slurped at his own "daily special garbage udon" meal.

"…Hmm. Is this neglect? Are you neglecting me? Fine, then, but I'm going to stress eat!" There was no stopping her now. "And then, I'll get fatter and fatter. Only my boobs will get fatter and fatter, you'll see! *Kksshh!*"

Sulking, she rummaged around in her backpack for something under Eiri's wrathful glare. Eventually, she pulled up some sort of device shaped like a thin black tube and placed it on the table.

"…Hmm? What's that?"

She let Kyousuke's worried question go without responding in retaliation for earlier, and Renko dug through her bag again. What she took out were three jelly drinks in a silver pack.

It seemed that this was Renko's lunch.

With everyone watching, Renko attached the black tube to the right side of the gas mask, then inserted the pointed tip at the other end into an opened jelly drink. *"Sluurrp…sluurrp… slurpslurp…"* She began to steadily suck up the contents. Just like using a straw.

"You don't even take the gas mask off a mealtimes?! That's insanely consistent!!" Kyousuke couldn't resist making a jab at her. Renko laughed with a *kksshh*.

"Well, I'd like to take it off, too, in truth. I'd like to, but I can't."

"Uh…not that you won't, but you *can't*? What do you mean—?"

"Oh, well, it's really no big deal. I'm allowed to take it off as I please when I'm in my dorm room." Renko finished the first jelly drink and opened the second one as she answered.

Worried that he might intrude on her privacy by plainly asking her any more details, Kyousuke decided to hold his tongue. It was then that he realized he barely knew anything about this girl in the gas mask. He definitely had no idea why she was in this school, or how

many people she had killed, or even—

"…Oh, that's right." Renko's voice interrupted Kyousuke's thoughts, keeping him from giving voice to his questions. "By the way, Maina…"

At the sound of her name being called, Maina jumped in her seat, her utensils clanging together. "Y-yes?! Wh-wwwh-what is it?!" The knife and fork that she had been using to cut her "daily special garbage hamburg steak" stopped and rattled against the top of her plate.

Renko tilted her head quizzically and slurped up her jelly. "Nothing, just that you look really tense. I was just thinking that, until you get used to the atmosphere of this place, it might be better to leave you alone. You're not used to it yet, are you?"

"Eh?! Um…well, see…s-sowwy…sowwy!"

"*Kksshh.* You don't have to be so nervous. I may look unusual on the outside, but you can relax. I'm not going to rub up against you, or lick you, or kiss you out of the blue…unlike Kyousuke."

"Hey. Stop talking like I might rub her or lick her or kiss her."

"…Hmm, am I wrong? Of course, if Kyousuke did those things to me, I wouldn't mind a bit."

"Seriously?!"

Renko had gotten her teeth into Kyousuke and let out a "*kksshh*..." sigh in his direction. "…There, you see? You really do want it, just as expected. Your eyes give you away…do you see that, Maina? This is Kyousuke Kamiya's true nature. He's not a manly man, he is what we call a lustful man."

Taking advantage of the break in Renko's speech, Eiri spit out, "…He's a sleazebag is

what you mean."

*I really wish she would just keep her mouth shut at times like this, instead of making things worse.*

Kyousuke tried to save himself. "They're having fun saying all this nonsense, but it's just jokes. Please don't take it seriousl—"

"Eeek!! Please don't look at me! What would happen if I got pregnant?! You're debauched! Filthy! Shameleeesss!"

"That's it, you've got it exactly right. That story about him getting busy with twelve girls, and using 'in utero' power to get them pregnant just by looking at them, that's all true. Kyousuke Kamiya…is a nasty guy!"

"…He's an enemy to women. He should die."

"……"

He didn't feel like making another comeback. Kyousuke shut up and slurped his garbage udon. As the name indicated, it tasted as though the broth had been scooped out of the bottom of a soggy trash can. He grimaced at the flavor.

"Oh no, Kyousuke's sulking. I got caught up in the moment, but did I go too far? At least I relieved a little bit of the tension… Moving on, next is to develop a beautiful love with Maina—"

*Whizz!*

A silver light sparkled on the edge of his vision.

*Crassh!*

Something solid struck Renko's gas mask near the eyes, throwing her back.

"……Um," Maina's voice squeaked out.

Eiri, who had finished her meal and was yawning and stretching with boredom, bent backward with a start. Another flash whizzed by her throat.

The weapon that had impacted Renko's mask—a small silver knife—fell to the floor with a clatter.

"……"

A dumbfounded silence descended over the group.

"Uh…um…just now, that was…m-my hand…hand slipped, and…"

Kyousuke, Renko, and Eiri all fearfully turned to look.

Maina, color draining from her face, was frozen still, holding nothing but air in her right hand.

Kyousuke gulped loudly.

"Maina…did you *throw a knife* just now?"

"Yes!! S-sss-sowwy! It wasn't on p-purpose…"

*Whizz!* Again, a menacing silver flash.

"What the—?! Th-that's dangerous…"

He reflexively dodged the fork, which Maina had thrust forward at the same time she'd turned to face him. By tilting his head, he had narrowly avoided the three-pronged spear flying at his eyeball… Having dodged it by a mere hair's breadth, he broke into a cold sweat.

"Aaaaaahhh!! That one, too! Not on p-ppp-purpose… Waaahh!"

"Wha—?! I know that already! I know already, so calm do— Whoooaaa!!"

*Whish! Whish! Whish! Whish!*

Flapping the hand holding the fork in a panic, Maina thrust over and over again in Kyousuke's direction, faster than he could see. The target was always that vital spot—the eye.

Kyousuke frantically ducked to avoid the shower of potential punctures. "…*Gasp*… hah… I th-thought I was gonna die…" By the time he managed to wrestle the dangerous utensil away from her, both Kyousuke and Maina were covered in sweat.

Maina, who had raised both hands and stood up, apologized while shedding fat tears. "Waahh…! S-sowwy! It wasn't…*hic*…on purpose."

"Yeah…I know! I get it, so relax already. Will you calm down for once, Maina? Somehow I'm not hurt, so… To start with, let's sit down. Calm down. Okay?"

"O-okay…I'b sowwy…*sniff*…*hic*." As Maina sat down and wiped her tears away, Kyousuke breathed a sigh of relief.

Renko and Eiri, completely dazed, looked at each other, then Maina.

"…Hmmm, what was that just now? You just straight up attacked me, didn't you? If this mask hadn't been here, that knife was on a direct course to hit my eye! I definitely would have gone blind."

"…Honestly, I was in danger, too. Your throwing power was weak, but if I hadn't been able to react, I don't know what might have happened. Now I get it…this is the clumsiness that kills people."

With her chin in her hand, Renko cocked her head. "…Clumsiness?"

"Yeah. That's what it is, clumsiness!" Kyousuke interjected. "She doesn't really want to hurt or kill anybody, it's just—"

"Stop…you've said plenty, Kyousuke," Maina interrupted. She blew her nose loudly and lifted her face from her handkerchief. "I can tell my own story…about my own clumsiness." Bit by bit, in a penitent tone, Maina told them the reason why she had been thrown into the Purgatorium Remedial Academy. She began to talk slowly and quietly about the murders she had committed.

X X X

Maina Igarashi had killed three people. She had beaten two of them to death and killed one of them with *food*.

Her first victim was a boy in her school class, who gripped his chest in anguish the instant he took a bite of the bento box lunch Maina had made. Panic-stricken Maina let loose with her clumsiness.

She created a destructive hurricane in the classroom during lunchtime—as a result, there were eight casualties, including the teachers who had come running. Among them, two female students had died; Maina had caused a horrible, unprecedented accident.

Meanwhile, the boy who had originally eaten the bento had foamed at the mouth and also eventually passed away.

In agreement with Maina's testimony that "it was just ordinary cooking…," no poison

was found in the omelet that was determined to be the cause of death. However, the presence of *extremely stimulating ingredients* was confirmed.

In other words, the moment that he ingested the omelet, the male student's digestive organs were overrun by an unimaginable stimulus. It turned out that the boy who lost his life to a bento had died of shock—it was a case of "death by digestion."

After the incident, when a researcher fed Maina's cooking to laboratory mice, the death rate was recorded at a menacing 90 percent. It was just barely food and closer to poison.

There were different symptoms depending on the type of food, including excessive perspiration, diarrhea and vomiting, breathing difficulties, heart attack, and even general paralysis and full-body convulsions. It wasn't clear which one of these was the cause of death, and not one of them appeared if anyone other than Maina prepared the food, even using the same ingredients and following the same preparation procedures.

In awe, they had given her the nickname "Black Pandora."

And so it was that Maina had been shipped off to Purgatorium Remedial.

Kyousuke's first impressions when he finished listening to Maina's story was: "…No way, that must be an exaggeration! Especially the part about your cooking."

At any rate, it was way too absurd. However—

"It's all true… Everything, really…it's the truth." A sob escaped from Maina's deeply downcast mouth. Her tearful voice, along with the clenched fists that were shaking on her lap, gave credence to the truth of her story.

"That's why you can't get too close to me…it's dangerous! I don't want to hurt

anybody… I don't want to kill anybody, so you can't. I'm sorry. If you get mixed up with me, anything could—"

"Sure. But we don't care about that, so it's fine, right?" Renko interrupted. She seemed quite indifferent to the whole explanation.

"That's right. As I expected, it's better for me to be alone, so—wait, whaaaaaat?!" Lifting her dejected face, Maina stared at Renko, who was leisurely unfastening the tube connected to the side of her gas mask.

"Well, you can't cook here, and you're not going to go out of your way to kill anyone, right? Even if you are dangerously clumsy, if we know that's how you are, we can support you and cope with you as we like, can't we? We're just surprised is all, since we didn't know about your past."

"Easier said than done," remarked Kyousuke. "It's not like everything will be okay just because you think you understand the danger."

Eiri gave Kyousuke a scornful "*hmph*." His eyebrows were knitted in unease. "…You're an idiot, Kyousuke. It's meaningful precisely because her deadly weapon is hidden, don't you see? If an opponent knows from the beginning that 'she has a knife' or whatever, then they might run away, or at least be more vigilant. They become more aware. However, if she stuffs herself to the gills with hidden weapons, and then someone gets too close… Well, being cut up with no warning is much scarier. In other words, the first attack is the most dangerous, because after that you can prepare. Understand?"

Renko nodded her agreement with the uncharacteristically talkative Eiri. "That's right. That's our Eiri! You understand it perfectly. So Kyousuke, I don't think you need to worry,

either! Maina can't help that she makes blunders. But we can lend Maina our support so that she can try her best not to make so many of them. That's probably what Eiri meant when she said 'vigilant,' see?"

"Hmm…I see. That's right. It's just as the two of you say, probably…"

Kyousuke had known about Maina before now. Her clumsiness could lead to all kinds of destruction and certainly posed a threat… However, he had relaxed some while talking with Renko and Eiri, and he had probably been slacking in his vigilance against Maina's antics. Maybe he hadn't been considerate enough when it came to relieving Maina's nervousness.

Given the timing of the last two incidents of lethal clumsiness, Kyousuke was beginning to suspect that it was triggered by critical stress. They would need to take care to practice vigilance and consideration toward Maina.

"Um…but that doesn't change the fact that I'm dangerous, so…still…" Hanging her head again, Maina pressed the tips of her index fingers together. Surely, she thought only that she had been rejected.

Eiri smiled bitterly at Maina's confusion. "You know…you can say that you're dangerous as much as you like, but isn't everyone around you dangerous, too? There's nothing but murderers in here. There's no doubt that you're not safe here, but we can relax around you. It's those other assholes with concealed weapons and hidden insanity that are truly dangerous. They're who we have to watch out for, right?" Eiri's sharp gaze fell on Renko.

Ignoring the piercing glint in Eiri's eyes, the freakish girl in the black gas mask laughed with a dull "*kksshh*." "Yeah, that's right. I'm in agreement, Eiri. …By the way, you already know all about my deadly weapons, don't you? Especially Kyousuke. Because you've been

*nearly killed by me* many times already."

"…Wha—? Me by you? You must be joking, Renko…?"

He had absolutely no memory of that. Did she mean that he had nearly been killed without noticing?

—A shiver went up his spine.

Where on earth was she hiding a deadly weapon, this Gas Mask Girl?

"*Kksshh.* You haven't figured it out yet? My deadly weapon, it's…"

Kyousuke, Maina, and even Eiri held their breath in anticipation. With everyone's gaze converging on her, Renko slowly folded her arms.

"—My boobs, duh. My opponent loses too much blood from a nosebleed and bleeds to death, or else I smother them and they suffocate… In other words, death by enchantment. It's no wonder I'm the 'Busty Killer'!"

Swinging her abundant breasts, Renko arched her back boastfully.

"…Liar." "…You're lying."

Kyousuke's and Eiri's retorts were simultaneous and abrupt.

Just after, laughter rang out from beside Kyousuke. "…Tee-hee-hee." When he looked, Kyousuke saw that Maina was giggling, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. When she noticed that she was being watched, she calmed a bit. "Umm, I mean… You're all really fun!"

She touched her cherry blossom pink–tinted cheeks, seemingly embarrassed.

X X X

“Anyway, that’s what I think… It’s not just that bigger is better. Your shoulders get stiff, and it’s difficult to move, plus there’s not too much cute underwear… Tragically, they’re more inconvenient than you would think. I don’t think that people who haven’t got them understand that, you know? I’m jealous of you, Eiri…*kksshh*.”

“…Don’t laugh. If you’re that jealous, how about I cut them off for you, Renko?”

“Huh?! Don’t joke like that, I’m the huge-breasted character, after all! If I lose my boobs, my characterization won’t have anything to stand on, and Kyousuke won’t be able to ‘stand up,’ either!”

“Shut up!” Eiri scolded. “Your scant personality probably wouldn’t disappear along with your breasts, and it’s not like we’d be missing much if it did.”

“Yeah, yeah. But I really don’t need to worry at all. Kyousuke’s been incompetent from the start, anyway.”

“Incompetent? What’s ‘incompetent’?” Maina asked. “Hhmmm…could it be an antonym for ‘omnipotent’?”

“The antonym of ‘omnipotent’ isn’t ‘incompetent,’ it’s ‘ineffectual,’ Maina,” answered Eiri. “That’s not an uncommon mistake, though.”

“Oh, I see! In other words, Kyousuke is both incompetent and ineffectual, right?!”

“…Yeah, that’s right. Incompetent, ineffectual, imbecile,” Eiri continued, “a real good-for-nothing whose only redeeming feature is his fleshy desires—”

“Knock it off! You’ve already cut me down to nothing, the three of you!!”

The four were just leaving the cafeteria, headed for their various classrooms. Kyousuke was on the receiving end of all of the jokes as they walked down the hallway. He breathed a

sigh of relief and resignation in front of the three girls who had hit it off so well. *I didn't mean for me to be the only one getting teased, but…at least the mood's good. Even Maina's nerves seem to have settled down for the most part. Things seem to be going along unexpectedly well like this.* Watching Maina engage in friendly chatter, Kyousuke was feeling secretly content.

"Hyeeeaaahhh! There you are! I fooound you! Gya-ha-ha!"

The hoarse voice echoing down the hallway of the old school building was instantly recognizable. Kyousuke and the others, approaching the front of an empty classroom, turned reluctantly to face the sound.

When they did, as expected, there was—

"…Mohawk. Did they manage to bring you back to life in the infirmary?"

The boy with the bright red Mohawk stood before them, his whole body wrapped up in bandages. "Gya-ha-ha! Of course! I'm the immortal man, you know. I'll revive dozens of times, hundreds of times, thousands of times! Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Eiri muttered a terse answer. "…How annoying."

Kyousuke felt the same way. Just when Maina had finally calmed down, this guy had to show up… *This asshole really doesn't know how to read the room.* Kyousuke kept his voice low. "…And? What do you want, Mohawk? Do you have some business with us?"

"As a matter of fact I do, of course! But first, let me educate you! This whole time you've been calling me 'Mohawk, Mohawk,' but my real name is—"

"We don't have any business with you, so no need to go on…right, Mr. Kamiya? Heh-heh-heh." Interrupting Mohawk's announcement, three bandage-wrapped students shuffled around a corner. Big, medium, and small—of the three bandaged figures lined up in a row behind Mohawk, the medium-sized one appeared to be Shinji. That meant the other two were probably…

"The only one we got business with is that tiny bitch over there! Making us suffer through this… In return, we're gonna get plenty rough with you, so prepare yourself!! Fuck!"

"Hee-hee-hee…of course, we mean…s-s-sexually…we'll punish you good… Hee-hee-hee…"

Big and small were definitely the dreadlocked Oonogi and the hunchback Usami. It appeared that the trio had returned, looking for revenge after all the pain that Maina's clumsiness had caused them.

Confronted by their over malice, Maina shrieked and began trembling. "Back then, um, I…s-sorry! F-forgive me…pwease forgibe me!"

"If people were satisfied with apologies, we wouldn't need the police!! Riiiiight?!" Mohawk threatened with redoubled intensity.

Maina leaped up with another "eeek!!" and grabbed onto Renko, who was next to her.

Patting Maina's trembling head, Renko coolly quipped back at him, "Aren't all of your people indebted to police officers, though?"

Renko was poking fun at his Mohican quality.

"Anyway, why the hell are you here with them? This has nothing to do with you, Mohawk," Shinji spat.

"Why? You wanna know?! Allow me to educate you! My real name is—"

"We met in the infirmary," Shinji interrupted. "We are unfortunately already very well acquainted… You're going to help our pathetic side out." He smiled a bit, his mouth peeking out from under his dressings. "Wow, you're a really kind person, aren't you? Hee-hee-hee."

Any hint of human expression quickly faded from Shinji's face, replaced by a cold, almost mechanical demeanor. "…Well, then, everyone, would you kindly step out of my way? As I said before, my business is with Miss Maina alone. And we don't have much time, so…if I could just take Miss Maina, I'll quietly be on my way. I have no intention of causing harm to anyone else. Got it?"

Maina jumped a bit at the gentle smile that crept across Shinji's face as he finished speaking. Eyes wavering with anxiety and fear, she looked first at the bandage-wrapped thugs, then back to Kyousuke and the others. She hung her head, shutting her eyes tightly, but continued to grasp onto Renko and said in a thin, shaky voice, "I-I understand…if that's how it is, then I'll go quietl—"

"…Huh? What is that, a joke?" Eiri stepped brusquely in front of Maina, positioning herself between Shinji's group and the smaller girl. She spoke bitterly, swinging her coppery-red ponytail. "Do you think she's just going to obediently comply with what you small fries say? Why don't you wait to spew that kind of bullshit until after you're dead? I'm about to kill you now, see, so you won't wait very long. …That is, if you lay a single finger on Maina." Her voice was dispassionate and sounded more annoyed than anything else.

Maina's eyes opened wide. "Eiri…wh-why…?"

"*Kksshh.* Isn't it obvious?" Renko said. "Because she's your friend. I'm not really sure

what's going on, but if it seems like you're in danger, she can't just stand by and watch silently… Yeah, Eiri's so kind!" Renko let out a regretful sigh. "*Kksshh.* She's really stealing the scene, though…"

Maina's eyes were now filling with tears. "E-Eiri…!"

"…Don't mention it." Eiri waved a hand dismissively. "I just can't stand these guys is all. Don't get me wrong."

Watching Eiri with interest, Shinji licked his lips. "Hmm… This is unexpected, Miss Eiri. However, if you foil our plans, the rest of you girls will have to get hurt as well. Hee-hee-hee… Of course, I won't complain. After all, I've had my eyes on you for quite a while."

"Yeah. I'll give you a warm welcome, too!" Oonogi said. "I'm a strong guy, so I can really hold you down! Plus, you're an incredible beauty. Maybe a little…flat, but I don't mind. Let's do it!!"

"Heh…tiny boobs, otherwise known as flat as a board…," Usami muttered. "…A sheer cliff…an A cup… Heh-heh-heh…"

"…All of you are better off dead," Eiri retorted. "So I'll kill you." Her voice was low and venomous.

"Kill us? Well, I don't mind, Miss Eiri… That is, if you think you can." Shinji snickered.

"And you think I can't?" Eiri's voice had lost all hint of emotion.

Shinji's bandage-plastered cheeks distorted in a crazed grin. "I meant just what I said. You may have killed six people, but after all, you're just a weak girl. And we're all unarmed at the moment. So I really do wonder if you could actually kill us? If you can manage it, then

—”

“Hyeeeeaaaaahh!”

The door separating the vacant classroom from the hallway exploded open, Mohawk flying out in a crash. He’d apparently entered the classroom unnoticed and worked his way up through the inside to the door.

Hoisting a chair high overhead, Mohawk bore down on Maina, who stood trembling before him.

“…Wha—?! Shit—”

Neither Eiri, who had moved around to the back of the group, nor Renko who stood closest to Maina (perhaps because the gas mask created blind spots) was able to react to the surprise attack from the side.

“Eeeeeek!!” Maina closed her eyes and covered her head.

The heavy chair, covered in graffiti, came swinging down seconds from impact.

*“Blast off.”*

“What?!”

Kyousuke’s fist smashed into the side of Mohawk’s pierced and bandaged face, sending him flying through the air, spewing bloody vomit and agonized screams. He sailed over Eiri,

then Shinji, then Oonogi and Usami…

"Hurk!!" Mohawk crashed headlong to the floor and, still not totally out of momentum, rolled at great speed down the hall, stirring up clouds of dust and debris.

"Fwah!!" He slammed into a classroom door, smashing through it in a spectacular display. From inside the room echoed the sounds of a particularly destructive crash.

Enveloped in clouds of white dust, Mohawk showed no sign of getting back up.

"…"

In the silence that had fallen over his surroundings, Kyousuke slowly unclenched his tight fist and lowered it. "Phew…" Letting out a small breath, he rolled his shoulders around and cracked his neck. He spoke up in a threatening voice.

"What the hell are you doing, you pack of murderers?"

The words came out so deep and guttural that even he was surprised. "You willfully pick a fight, then just as easily get the tables turned on you…and what's next, you assemble a group and come back for revenge? This must be a joke. Look at your opponents—they're just girls."

Shinji and his lackeys stared at Mohawk's final resting place. Eventually, they turned to look at Kyousuke with stiff, mechanical movements, like wind-up dolls in need of oil.

"Ah-ah-ha-ha…not at all, Mr. Kamiya! You saw it yourself, didn't you? Miss Maina is in no way a weak girl. Pretending that it's all just clumsiness, she sets about to kill her opponent, what a cruel and cunning killer! If you had been among her opponents, you, too,

would have been kill—"

*Bam!!* Kyousuke smashed the fallen chair underfoot, quickly cutting off the aggravating laughter. Shinji's smiling face twitched as he watched the steel chair get crushed nearly flat. "…I won't let you kill her, absolutely not. She's got nothing in common with low-life assholes like you guys. Even someone like me, who killed every one of those twelve guys, there's no way I could kill even one girl, don't you see? What the hell are you saying that Maina is a 'cruel and cunning killer'…? I mean really?! Don't make me laugh…!"

*That's right. There's no way that Maina is like that. She just a little dumber than most other people. I mean, pretending to be clumsy in order to hide her lethal intentions… could that be? No, don't be stupid. Maina's not that clever. She's just an awkward but gentle girl.*

"If you want a truly inhuman homicidal maniac…you're talking about some crazy bastard like *me*! If you're so eager, how about I give you a taste right here and now? Of a genuine, real-deal *murderer*?!" Kyousuke put one leg up on the trampled chair and leaned forward, his arm on his knee, hoping his bluff would stand.

He would keep Maina far away from the threat of these killers, and protect her. *In order to ensure that they don't go near her again*—Kyousuke decided to at least try to get some use out of the false identity he'd been assigned.

Oonogi, Usami, and Shinji. He lorded over their three stiff faces with what he hoped were dangerous-looking eyes. "…If not, then beat it! Don't ever come close to Maina…to my friend, again. If you do, then next time—" He tried to speak like he imagined someone called the Warehouse Butcher would speak.

*"...I'll butcher every single one of you."*

"…Wha—?!" "…Eeh?!" "…Huh?!" Oonogi looked daunted, Usami curled up on himself, and Shinji was silent, making a sour face.

"K-Kyousuke…" Maina was befuddled, while Eiri whispered to herself, "…Scary."

Renko just laughed quietly with a "*kksshh*." And then—

"Whoa…"

"…so"

"Coooooooooool!"

A huge crowd of students had surrounded them at a distance to watch, assembling without Kyousuke and the others noticing.

Standing in the front row, Bob shrieked, her meaty hands pressed on her cheeks.

"Huh?! Oh, shit…that just drew a lot of attentio—"

*It's a little late to notice that now.*

Following Bob's outcry, the narrow hallway was filled with applause and cheers.

Renko plunked her hand down on Kyousuke's shoulder, as he stood stock-still in the midst of the excited cheering. "Wooow, Kyousuke. A solid punch and some good threats! As expected from the top killer! And you managed to slay everyone's hearts in an instant, didn't you…? If you're not careful, you'll slay me, too. Could you be the 'Casanova Killer'? *Kksshh.*"

"Before we worry about that," Kyousuke replied in a powerless voice, "they're probably gonna kill me…and not my heart, but my actual body." He cast a sidelong glance at the herd of enthusiastic, frenzied murderers. *Come to think of it, Mohawk was too weak… Did he really go flying just from such a light punch? Or have I gotten altogether unreasonably strong…dammit.* It seemed like his situation was growing more and more problematic.

As he thought about his future life at this school, Kyousuke's shoulders sagged.

# Smells Like Rotten Blood

## RUSTY NAIL, RUSTY HEART

FOURTH PERIOD

**Q.** WHAT ARE YOUR RECOMMENDED MENU ITEMS IN THE CAFETERIA AND SCHOOL SHOP?

**A.** MY RECOMMENDATIONS ARE THE "DAILY SPECIAL GARBAGE SET MEAL" AND "TODAY'S LEFTOVER BREAD." MOST OF THE INGREDIENTS IN THE MEALS HERE ARE THE CORES OF VEGETABLES AND THE FATTY BITS OF MEAT AND SO ON. THEY REUSE THINGS THAT, PROPERLY SPEAKING, SHOULD BE THROWN AWAY AS KITCHEN SCRAPS. IT'S ECO-FRIENDLY! ...AND ME? TODAY I ATE CHATEAUBRIAND STEAK FROM DOMESTIC WAGYU BEEF. CAN YOU BASTARDS ACTUALLY EAT THAT PIG SLOP? HOW DISGUSTING!

# Smells Like Rotten Blood

## RUSTY NAIL, RUSTY HEART

## FOURTH PERIOD

"…The state is destroyed by warfare, but the mountains and rivers are as always; spring comes to the city, and the grasses and trees bloom thickly—"

Reading aloud from an open textbook in her left hand, and tapping the iron pipe held in her right hand on her shoulder, Kurumiya paced slowly around the room. As usual, the classroom was enveloped in a tense atmosphere, but recently even that tension had begun to slacken.

Since class at Purgatorium Remedial Academy had begun five days ago, the students had begun to adapt to their strange new circumstances. Even Kyousuke, who was not a hardened killer, was no exception.

"—The flowers weep for these sad times; lamenting separation, the birds are stricken to the heart…" Kurumiya's pass beside him sent a chill down Kyousuke's spine, but even that was momentary. It may have been because, as a teacher, Kurumiya could not spend all her time on discipline.

Aside from the fact that several times a day, a student (usually Mohawk) would provoke

Kurumiya's wrath and receive a brutal punishment, class was conducted remarkably peacefully.

The omnipresent graffiti scrawl, the glaring eyes of his classmates, Kurumiya's insane temperament, the bullying, the harassment, the various other deplorable injustices—if it hadn't been for all of that, it would have been pretty much the same scene as the middle school Kyousuke had attended…

*"…Yawn."* He couldn't say he didn't understand Eiri's drowsy relaxation.

At Purgatorium Remedial, each teacher taught every subject to a single class. It was an unusual system, but Kurumiya was a surprisingly good educator, insane sadism notwithstanding. Under her guidance, the main points of a text were easy to grasp and to retain, and Kyousuke had no trouble recalling any of her lessons.

Even her characteristically childish voice was sweet and easy to listen to. "…The beacon fires have continued burning for three months; a letter from home would be worth ten thousand pieces of gold—" Listening to Du Fu's poem "Spring View" being read so delicately, Kyousuke could feel the time slip away.

In this way, daily life at the institution was less troublesome than he had expected. However— *Only ten more minutes, and then it's after school…huh…* There was one thing that was causing Kyousuke some serious distress: the fistfuls of stationery stuffing his pockets. That morning, he'd found a stack of letters addressed "to Kyousuke" waiting in his shoe cubby. Written in girlie bubble letters and with hearts drawn on them, these letters were the source of all evil, threatening Kyousuke's fragile tranquillity.

"—My white hair becomes ever shorter from scratching; too thin to hold even a

hairpin…" Feeling like Kurumiya's lisping voice was far, far away, Kyousuke clenched his fists.

There were just a few minutes left until the final death knell of the day rang out. He could not afford to mess it up again this time.

X X X

"Kamiya, I, well… The fact that you killed twelve people, it makes you very…"

School was out. Behind the deserted gymnasium, Kyousuke found himself face-to-face with a female student. Her snow-white skin contrasted beautifully with her glamorous black hair. This second-year girl, his senior, had both hands clasped behind her back and was rocking back and forth bashfully.

She gazed at Kyousuke with upturned eyes, bordered by long eyelashes, and took a deep breath, as if to steady her resolve. Her face was as red as an apple. "I really like you! So, please, go…uh…please go out with me!" Her words burst with hidden feelings.

She thrust out a survival knife that she'd been keeping hidden behind her back. Her aim was for Kyousuke's throat. "Waaah! S-sorry!"

*A knife.* Narrowly evading the surprise attack, he sunk a fist into the pit of her stomach. With an "oof" and a puff of hot breath, and a blissful expression painted across her face, the upperclassmen crumpled over. Catching her collapsing body before she could fall, Kyousuke wiped away the cold sweat that had begun to collect on his forehead.

*That was really dangerous, just now. I was careless because she was an*

*upperclassman. I thought the second-years were supposed to be more rehabilitated. So why did she have a knife…?*

"…Huh? Did you turn down another one? This one's a real beauty, though." As Kyousuke laid the unconscious upperclassman down on the ground, Renko stepped out of the shadows of the gymnasium.

A moment later, Eiri and Maina also appeared. Eiri stifled a yawn, while Maina said, "Kyousuke, you're really popular. Amazing!" and clapped her hands in applause.

Kyousuke sighed deeply and stood. "Eh, I go for personality over looks…and it's not like I'm happy just being popular among the weirdos, you know." Three days had passed since the incident in the hall—and every day since, Kyousuke had been getting these bizarre love confessions.

In total, ten girls had approached him. At more than three per day, it was the start of a true era of romantic popularity for him. Of course, as they were a bunch of murderers, their methods of confession were nothing if not eccentric.

"I want to know 'everything' about you, Mr. Kamiya!" he heard, as he was nearly dissected.

"I'll devour you, Kyousuke…I'll become one with you," he heard, as he was tackled by a girl with coal-black eyes.

"I want to turn you into furniture and do some interior decorating," he heard, receiving a cryptic come-on from a girl with a saw in her hand.

And if he wasn't dealing with some bizarre confession of love, he was running around in fear of certain death at the furious hands of Bob, who, bawling with the shock of rejection,

had transformed into an uncontrollable human juggernaut and destroyed a section of one of the school buildings. That alone was enough to drive him to the brink.

The fact that Renko and the others appeared for the confessions acted as a kind of insurance against any worst-case scenarios. He hadn't needed their help yet, but it was surely just a matter of time. "There's no way I can keep this up…I'm really gonna die!" Exhausted in mind and body, Kyousuke hung his head, racking his brain in search of a plan.

With a "hmm," Renko folded her arms and put her index finger to her cheek. "All kinds of girls are throwing themselves at you, aren't they…? It's pushing your mental limits more than your physical. You can't help being so popular…but how can we help you…? Oh, I know!" Struck with inspiration, she clapped her hands together tightly. "They're all confessing their love to you because you're still single! Supposing you were to get a girlfriend, the confessions would stop! …Right? Don't you think that's a great idea? *Kksshh.*"

"No, no, that's impossible," he replied. "I don't have anyone." The only people he knew would go out with him if he asked also posed a serious threat to his life.

"Hmm? Sure you do, Kyousuke. You've got high-quality girlfriend candidates right here…three of us!" Turning, Renko opened her arms wide to encompass Eiri and Maina.

Hearing this, Eiri immediately shut her down. "…Huh? No way."

Maina looked down in embarrassment. "Eeh?! K-Kyousuke's girlfriend?! That's totally impossible… Um, how do I say, well… Sorry!"

Kyousuke hadn't even expressed interest, and he was still being rejected. "C'mon, Renko, you're making things weird. Lay off, huh?" He wouldn't call the atmosphere "crushing," but it was pretty oppressive.

After all, Eiri and Maina were both really beautiful, and he had thought that they had become close in their own way over the past few days, but what was with those knee-jerk responses? It felt like instant death.

Renko nodded with a "*kksshh*" at Kyousuke's hurt feelings. "Well. Okay, then, it's settled! Go out with me, Kyousuke."

"I'll pass."

"—"

"Ah, wait…I-I mean, look! I can't see your face for the gas mask. I think you're easy to get along with and interesting and all, but dating someone whose face you can't see would be…I mean…" Looking as she did, it was more than a little scary when she went totally silent like this, because her changes in expression were impossible to read.

Renko huffed, "*Kksshh*...," at Kyousuke, who could barely contain spasms of laughter. "Didn't you just say that personality is more important than looks? Was that a lie?"

"Um, it wasn't a lie, but…there's a limit, you know? With someone who wears a gas mask twenty-four seven, there's got to be something up with them, right? I mean, that's pretty suspicious…?"

"Mean…!! You're mean, Kyousuke! Too mean! And I believed you when you said that… But you're the kind of person who picks his girlfriend based on her pretty face, aren't you? And they say as long as your boobs are big, you're good. I believed you!"

Yelling at him in her characteristically willful way, Renko flew at Kyousuke. As a matter of course, her abundant breasts pressed against his chest. Feeling that supple softness, Kyousuke couldn't bear it anymore and cried out.

"Hey! Stupid…back off! Stop touching me!"

"No way! I'll never, never, never separate from you! *Kksshh! Kksshh!*"

"Don't throw a tantrum! And don't play with your chest like that! If you move them around so v-vigorously, then…"

Whether accidentally or on purpose, as Renko was twisting around going, "No way, no way," her boobs rubbed back and forth against Kyousuke with a delightful squish. Even with the gas mask smacking him in the head, it was an experience of pure bliss.

Before he knew it, Kyousuke had abandoned all attempts at resistance. *Who cares if she has a gas mask…?*

*"…Tch."* A sharp click of the tongue interrupted his thoughts, and when he looked, Kyousuke saw Eiri glaring the two of them down with bloodthirsty eyes.

Maina, meanwhile had both cheeks in her hands and was blushing. "That's too bold, Renko…"

Having come to his senses, Kyousuke hurriedly put his hands on Renko's shoulders and tried to peel her away. "H-hey…get off me, Tits McMask! Stop trying to make out with me! Eiri and Maina are watching, you know! Think a little bit about how this looks—"

"That's the point, Kyousuke!" Renko cried out as she was pushed away. "That's the plan!"

Kyousuke gaped blankly at her sudden response. "…Huh? The plan? What plan? …What are you talking about?"

"It's my confession, my confession of love! I thought this would be the best method for stopping the rush of admirers coming after you."

"Seriously?! …What is that gonna do?"

Renko laughed at Kyousuke with a "*kksshh*." "It'll definitely be fun to find out, eh! Good things are sure to happen, so just relax. I'm trying to put an end to your days of perilous danger! *Kksshh!*" She punctuated her bold declaration by thrusting her magnificent chest out with pride.

The eyeholes of her gas mask gleamed brightly. Faced with an unusually trustworthy-seeming ally, Kyousuke regained some of his faded vitality. "What incredible cleava— I mean, confidence. I'm counting on you, Renko!"

X X X

"…I was an idiot to count on you."

It was lunchtime, Monday, after the weekend break. Seated in the cafeteria, Kyousuke had already sunk into a deep despair. He looked dejectedly at the spoon that was being fed to him, carrying a scoop of the "daily special garbage omelet rice."

Renko, who was seated next to him, grasping his arm in one hand and trying to make him eat the omelet rice with the other, let out a "kksshh" and lowered the spoon regretfully. "What's the matter, Kyousuke? You're not really getting into it. Let's be more flirty!"

Following her own suggestion, Renko pulled his arm closer to her and cuddled up to Kyousuke. The sweet shampoo scent wafted from everywhere on her soft body, strong enough to make him dizzy.

"……"

If it hadn’t been for the glint of the gas mask in the corner of his eye, he would likely have long ago lost all sense of reason.

FOOD.
DEATH

Since she had first met up with him at the start of the lunch period, Renko had fawned over him beyond excessively. *It's like she's showing off for the people around us.*

"…Say, Renko. I don't think any other girls are going to come near me with you hanging on me like this, but… Isn't there anything else we could try? Like this, it looks like we're dating."

"Right, that's the point. That's the strategy here. It's operation 'hang on each other in public and make everyone think we're dating'! It's not like we're really going out, so it should be fine, right?"

"Well, I guess so, yeah. But how do I say this…" *Going out with a mysterious girl in a gas mask—* He didn't want to be misunderstood, but there was really no way to talk about it without making things awkward.

"…You don't want to be thought of as someone who's dating a mysterious pervert in a gas mask, is that it?" Eiri interjected from across the table, casually speaking his inner thoughts aloud. "If I were you, Kyousuke, I would think it was disagreeable, too. It would make me question my tastes."

Renko seemed shocked at her complete lack of tact. "What?! I am not a pervert! You're misunderstanding! Can't you see the purity in my eyes?!"

"…No, I can't. I can't see them. Anyway, you are a pervert. Aren't you embarrassed to be rubbing and rubbing and rubbing all over him like that? …Look at Maina."

"……Uggh." Curling her small body into a ball and looking downward, Maina looked extremely embarrassed. As if to avert her attention from Kyousuke and the others, she was staring at her meal as hard as she could.

"…In the first place, you're way too worried about this!" Eiri continued. "The confessions of fangirls are going to slow down before too long anyway, so isn't it best just to leave well enough alone? I think provoking them in such a clumsy way will only backfire." Finishing up with a snort, "…Hmph," Eiri returned to her "daily special garbage pasta."

Perhaps agreeing with her assessment, Renko pulled away from Kyousuke, nodding enthusiastically. "Is that so? Well, I understand completely! In other words, what Eiri here is trying to say is: 'You're asking for it by cuddling up to him right in front of my eyes! You're doing it even though you know I want to make out with Kyousuke, too!'"

"Wha—?!" Eiri choked on her pasta.

"Huh?! Eiri, are you okaaayyy? Waaahhh!" Maina stopped eating and began to frantically rub Eiri's back.

Tears welled up in the corners of Eiri's narrow eyes as she glared at Renko. "Why the hell would you say that?! Are you an idiot? Are you gonna die? Do you want to die?!"

"Huh…but didn't you say it yourself, Eiri?" Renko answered. "You said, 'Don't provoke me.'"

"I never said that! And besides, don't go imitating me. It's annoying."

"…'I wasn't, but whatever.'"

"Huh?! Did I not just tell you not to imitate me?! That doesn't even sound like me!"

"'Tiny boobs are a status symbol. They have scarcity value. Not that I care about that. Piss off and die.'" Renko was trying hard to push all of Eiri's buttons.

"You…you're so annoying! Shut uuuuuup! I'll obliterate you!!" Her voice had reached a

falsetto pitch. Standing and leaning forward, Eiri was practically shouting. Her eyes, usually distant and calm, were now open wide, and her cheeks flushed a deep vermillion.

"Waaaaaahh, Eiri's mad!!" Renko cried. "Help me, Kyousuke! I'll be killed!" She flew at him energetically, the front of her gas mask impacting the bridge of his nose with a *konk*. Her boobs squished up against him in two soft bulges.

"Oww!! Hey, don't cling to me, Renko! Don't drag me into this! "

Eiri's wide eyes seized on Kyousuke, who was doing his best to tear Renko off of him. Her eyebrows, raised high in anger, twitched and spasmed. "…You say that, but at the same time you're excited, aren't you, you sex fiend?! Pervert."

"Wha—? What are you saying?"

"Your nose is bleeding," Maina offered. "Blood is gushing out of your nose, Kyousuke."

"……Huh?" He raised a hand to his face and came away with bright red blood coating his fingers. "Wh-what the hell is thiiiss?! Wait, this is because Renko's mask hit me—"

"It's because her boobs hit you!" Eiri accused. "How dare you get so excited just from some boobs… I don't understand. They're just lumps of fat. They're chub rolls. …Hmph."

"Eiri, you don't have any boobs, do you?" Maina asked.

"—"

"Aaaaaahhh!! S-sss-ssorry! I've always really liked you, Eiri, so… Waaahh!"

Perhaps because there was no way she could believe that Maina had said such a thing, Eiri placed both hands on the table and hung her head, chewing her lower lip hard. Her slim shoulders trembled with a slight, rapid motion.

Renko laughed in satisfaction with a "*kksshh*" and finally let go of Kyousuke. "Well,

then, it looks like I win this round, hmm? I think there are also boys who prefer them small, so there's no need for you to take it too seriously! It looks like Kyousuke likes them big, though. It looks like Kyousuke likes them big, though! …Are you crying over my boobs, Eiri?"

Repeating herself for some reason, Renko petted Eiri's head comfortingly.

Eiri's trembling suddenly stopped. She slowly lifted her bloodthirsty eyes.

"I won't ever…I'll never give in to you, stupiiiiiidd!" She swung her right fist at Renko in an aimless arc.

Renko quickly pulled her arm back in surprise and bent backward. "Wh-wwwh-what are you doing, Eiri? That's dangerous, you know!!"

*That was close. Her hand almost struck home.*

Even as she appeared to falter from Renko's overreaction, Eiri immediately furrowed her brow in displeasure. "Sh-shut up! You're just getting what you deserve!! Whenever you open your mouth, it's 'boobies, boobies'… It's so annoying! And what's up with that mask, anyway? Is it from Slipknot? A Screaming Mad George creation? Either way…it's so bad that it makes me doubt your sanity, to say nothing of your fashion sense."

"What did you say?!" Renko slapped the table and leaned forward. "Don't you make fun of them…I can't forgive those comments! I'll show you how a headbanger throws down in the mosh pit!!"

The air between them crackled with electric tension.

"…Hmph. If you think you can kill me, go ahead and try! I'll beat you at your own game."

"Ha! Would that be your revenge for earlier?" Renko taunted. "When it comes to breasts,

there's no doubt I reign supreme! *Kksshh.*"

"You…!" Eiri was almost too angry for words. "Well, I win in every other category, then! Do you even have any appeal aside from your chest?"

"Of course I do! I have big, beautiful double-lidded eyes and full, sexy lips and—"

"Huh? I told you, we can't see any of that for your mask. Don't repeat the same lame gag," Eiri scoffed. "And anyway…" Just then, the corners of her mouth turned down as she faced Kyousuke.

"Huh…?" Kyousuke answered around the napkin that Maina had helpfully used to plug his bleeding nose.

"…What are you two flirting for?" Eiri demanded, glaring at Kyousuke and Maina. "Are you trying to pick a fight?"

"Right, right, isn't it just too cruel! While Eiri and I were competing for your attention… th-this…this man stealer! This is *cheating*!" Renko's wailing reverberated through the cafeteria as she beat her hands against the table again and again.

Eiri's expression grew even more sullen. "…Huh? I am *not* competing," she grumbled.

The alleged man stealer, Maina, looked back and forth between Renko and Eiri in astonishment. "Waahh…I'm, I'm sorry! I h-had n-nnn-no intention of…waahh!"

"Hey, all of you! Calm down, okay?!" Kyousuke interrupted. "At least, dial down the volume a little—" It took a moment for Kyousuke to notice the many pairs of staring eyes fixed intently on the four of them. The girls in particular eyed them with dangerous glares. The emotions in their eyes were dark.

Envy. And hatred was there, too. The longing and desire that had been directed at

Kyousuke so far had been *completely flipped on its head*.

Of course, Renko and the others were the cause. From a third-party perspective, this spectacle of three girls quarreling, with Kyousuke at the center of it all, must have been an absolute scene of carnage. It could not have felt very good to watch.

A great number of ominous voices came flying into Kyousuke's ears, as an unpleasant sweat began to flow.

"Eeee! Those bitches are trying to snatch away darling Kyousuke('s life) without me!"

"Four people, huh? I wonder if I can finish such a big meal? I'll rooaast 'em, and steeaam 'em, annnd fryyy 'em, and booiil 'em…"

"I'm disappointed in you, Kyousuke. Fine, then. I will destroy you. If I can't have you, I will see to it you are completely destroyed."

"Say whaaaaaat?! Calm down! Calm down, Azrael! It would be terrible to unleash your heaven-scorching hellfire power now! You'll involve everyone around us!"

"……"

The atmosphere in the cafeteria had noticeably darkened. Every student could feel the tension, and it would not have seemed out of place had the entire crowd rushed him then and there.

Renko's "strategic" attempt to make everyone think the two of them were dating had been a spectacular failure. In fact, it had had exactly the opposite of her intended effect.

At the heart of it, the man himself was certainly…

"Stupid, stupid, stupiiiiiid! Kyousuke, you idioooooot!" Renko continued to wail, oblivious to the crowd. "But I still love you!" She raised her voice and clung to him even

more tightly.

The hostility raining down on them like machine-gun fire morphed into genuine intent to kill.

"You're the idiot, Renko!" Kyousuke protested. "Aren't you the one provoking them further?!" *Shkshkshkshk.* "Hey! Don't listen to your music, listen to what I'm saying! Turn down the volume!"

*Come to think of it, Renko did say that she's always listening to music… So she probably can't really hear the voices all around us.*

"This isn't just somebody else's problem, so…" Kyousuke made a bitter face. The jealousy and hatred of the female students was directed more at Renko than at Kyousuke.

Eiri was the only person who seemed to notice this, and after glancing at the dejected Maina, who was muttering, "I'm not a home-wrecker…," to herself, she glared at their surroundings with narrowed eyes. "It's fine, Kyousuke… Maina has me by her side. We won't interfere."

Just as one would expect from a cutthroat who had killed six people. Not a single sign of fear. And Maina herself had her deadly clumsiness; the two of them could hold their own.

The one he was worried about was Renko, but—

"…Couldn't you just leave her here?" Eiri offered. "You're in different classes, and she'd be getting what she deserved, anyway. She's always teasing you, and she has huge breasts… Or what if I were to rough her up myself? She's better off dead, anyway." Despite the cruelty of her suggestions, Eiri's tone was casual, almost relaxed. *Isn't the huge breasts thing a personal grudge…?*

Rubbing her gas mask against Kyousuke's chest, Renko looked at Eiri with a start. "Eh?! Better off dead, what are you…?! How mean! I'm gonna die from shock!! In body and mind, I am just a weak, little girl, so I will! In fact, when it comes to my present fragility, I am just like a baby. *Kkssh.*"

Kyousuke and Eiri both let out sighs at Renko's theatrical speech.

They had no idea what kind of homicidal maniac she was, but Renko didn't seem the least bit worried, even in this situation.

*Just once, I'd like her to at least display some genuine fear or pain*, Kyousuke thought. *If she could do that, then maybe the mask that she insists on wearing might also come unstuck from her head—*

x x x

"……Ren…ko?"

It was several days after the big uproar in the cafeteria—during the second-period break. Kyousuke mumbled in amazement before Renko, who was completely changed. Maina gasped sharply, and Eiri bit her lip silently.

"Who the hell would do something like this…? Too cruel…"

She was in an indescribably gruesome condition.

As if the gas mask itself hadn't been enough, now *graffiti* was scribbled all over the surface.

"Ugly," "BITCH" "dirty cocktease sow," "I'm a slut," "rape me," "cow," "pull 'em

down!" "fake tits," "die," "die," "die," "die of heatstroke," and so on.

Written in multicolored ink, the words collectively illustrated the spite, hostility, and murderous desires of the writers. The black surface was almost completely covered.

She didn't have any obvious wounds, but the graffiti alone was more than enough to showcase the malice and viciousness of her assailants and made Kyousuke and the others shudder. They took it as a warning—or maybe a threat.

Sitting at the center of their small group, Renko raised a hand. "*Kksshh*... Ahh, I was so surprised! When I woke up, there were girls surrounding my chair. They all really looked like they were out for blood…I guess there had been some kind of trouble while I was dozed off in my seat. I asked them what happened, but they just yelled back at me, 'Don't start acting up now!' and 'Frigid bitch!' and other mean stuff."

"…Th-that must have been terrible."

Those girls must have misunderstood and thought that they were being ignored, never imagining that Renko had slept through the whole process. Most people would expect that if someone wearing a gas mask was sitting upright normally, then they would be awake like a normal person.

"And then the strange reactions started in first period, when the teacher looked at my face and asked, '…What is that?' and then when I answered, 'It's a fashion statement,' he made a strange face and went silent. ...*Huh?* I thought, and then after that, everyone asked me about it, but I didn't really know what to say. Is my mask really that strange?"

With her head tilted to the side, Renko's voice was utterly free of worry. It was like she had no grasp on her situation. Was it innocence or defenselessness…? She really had her

own way of doing things.

Bewildered and amazed by this quality of hers, Kyousuke took a more direct approach. "Renko…your mask is covered with graffiti!"

"Wh-wwwh-what did you saaaaaayy?! Who the hell…when did they…?!" Bending backward, Renko's whole body shook with surprise.

"…It's obvious," Eiri spat in an irritated tone. "It was the girls who crowded around you. They spoke to you but you didn't reply, so they harrassed you, clearly. What miserable jerks…they'd be better off dead."

"Right, that's right, it's cruel!" added Maina. "How pitiful Renko looks…with all these mean things written on her. We'd better clean her up quickly…yep, yep." She stood from her chair and wiped vigorously at Renko's mask with her handkerchief to absolutely no effect.

Renko patted the smaller girl's head affectionately. "Okay, thanks Maina. But don't worry about it. I'll be sure to get it all off during the next break. By the way, what kinds of things are written on it? 'Beautiful breasts, beautiful girl,' and so on?"

"Uh, no…more like 'witch tits, pervert girl' and 'poison boobs, pervert girl' and 'evil breasts, pervert girl' and so on."

"Ehh?! But I told them I'm not a pervert! I don't even know what they mean with 'poison' and 'evil'! It doesn't even make sense! Those totally aren't even insults!"

"They totally are," Eiri replied.

"…They're graffiti, so I think they must be," Kyousuke answered simultaneously. *She has absolutely no sense of danger…* Renko didn't seem to have any idea how other people felt about her.

Sure enough, she folded her arms quizzically. “Anyway, why would I have such a thing done to me all of a sudden, I wonder?” she pouted. “And furthermore, the perpetrators were all girls. Could they be jealous of my beautiful face and boobs? Like Eiri, *kksshh*,” she continued, oblivious.

Eiri’s eyebrows twitched sharply. She glared at the graffiti-covered mask. “…Huh? That’s not it at all, ‘dumbass girl.’ Is ‘the inside of your head hollow’ because you only take nutrition from ‘dead breasts’? ‘Die,’ ‘die die,’ ‘die from respiratory distress.’”

“Whaaaaaat?! Saying such demeaning stuff is cruel…so cruel…”

“She’s right! Stop it, Eiri!” Maina reproached, stepping between them. “Renko’s the one who got hurt, and yet…”

Perhaps because Maina had taken Renko’s side, Eiri frowned sullenly. “…Whatever. I was just reading the graffiti. Anyway, she’s not actually hurt…but…Renko, you’re still laughing like an idiot. Surely your bloodlust must be practically boiling…” She clearly meant to agitate Renko, who had maintained her easygoing attitude.

Renko placed an index finger on her chin. “Let me see…,” she pondered aloud. “It is absolutely, no way, not even a little bit close to boiling! Actually, I think it’s kind of cute, like a collection of autographs, don’t you think? *Kksshh.* It’s too bad I can’t see it myself, but…tell me, what other kinds of things are written on there? They went to all the trouble, so tell me!”

“……”

Kyousuke, Eiri, and Maina all stared in amazement at Renko’s simplemindedness, all wearing the same expressions of disbelief.

*Did Renko really ever kill anybody?* they all pondered. Renko seemed like a harmless lump, who didn't mind no matter what was done to her. She didn't seem to be the slightest bit evil.

Or perhaps, she might be intentionally hiding her own insanity.

*I don't know what to think. This ugly, graffiti-covered mask hides Renko's interior self along with her face…* A kernel of fear had nevertheless taken hold in Kyousuke's mind. She was surely hiding something behind that mask and those mannerisms…

"Come on, you guys! Don't keep quiet, tell me. You've come to fancy the mask like this, to the point where you can't bear to leave for your next class, is that it? Come on, get a good look!"

For her part, Renko seemed entirely unconcerned with what Kyousuke might be thinking. She pulled back the hood of her sweatshirt and turned her head, pointing to the sides of the gas mask, which until now had been obscured.

The mask was the sort that only covered the front of the face, and now that he could see it clearly, Kyousuke was surprised by how unexpectedly small it was. A large pair of clunky black headphones covered her ears; the rest was uncovered. Long bluish-silver hair spilled out from between the black bands that secured the mask to her face.

As he studied the gas mask, a certain piece of graffiti caught Kyousuke's eye. On the right cheek of the mask, just to the side of the headphones, written in pink fluorescent paint:

> Dear Kyousuke ♥, I'll be waiting behind the gym tomorrow during lunch. Please make sure to come alone, okay? Unless you want this girl to die.

It was a note specifically calling Kyousuke out. It read a lot like the other love letters he'd been receiving, though this was the first one that had ended with such an overt threat. Perhaps because of the grimace that had crept across his face, Eiri looked at Kyousuke with puzzled eyes.

"…What is it, Kyousuke?"

"Hmm? Ah, no…nothing. It's nothing at all. Ha-ha-ha…" Kyousuke tried to hide his fear and anxiety behind a disarming smile as his thoughts raced.

If he ignored the invitation, Renko would be put in danger. On the other hand, this might be a chance for Kyousuke and the others to expose whatever it was that Renko was hiding…

If she was actually an insane killer, then putting her in a life-or-death situation would surely reveal her true nature.

*What should I do…ignore it? There doesn't seem to be any harm in doing that for now…*

In previous instances when he had been called out, his own life had been at stake if he didn't accept the challenge. Rather than deal with the hassle of repeated, frenzied ambushes, Kyousuke had tried to face each one openly, preferring quick resolutions.

However, this time he didn't have that option.

If he ignored this invitation, Renko would be the one facing trouble, not him, and whatever she was hiding would surely be revealed—two birds with one stone. However…

"Come on! Quit holding out on me!" Renko whined. "It's too mean! I don't mind that I was graffitied by people I don't know, but…if I'm ignored by my friends, I'm gonna get angry, too!" Pulling her hood back into its usual position, Renko laughed. *"Kksshh!"*

Kyousuke looked at Renko, wondering how she could stay so mysterious. *If, against the odds, this affable, simpleminded girl is not hiding anything after all…and I got her into trouble that got her killed…? Would that be any different than if I were to kill Renko myself?*

*I'd be just the same as the rest of these bastards. No different.* The murderers that Kyousuke hated and scorned— *That's right…what the hell was I thinking? There's only one answer.*

"……"

Eiri's gaze bored straight through Kyousuke, as if she had something to say, while he made a fist beneath his desk. However, she only glared and said nothing.

X X X

"Huh…nobody's here. Am I early?"

It was the agreed-upon hour. Kyousuke, who made his way to the back of the gym, surveyed his deserted surroundings and scratched the back of his head. Nestled between the wall of the building and a tall grove of trees, this place was dim and gloomy even in the afternoon.

He'd been called out here before a number of times, but this was his first time here alone. Renko and the others, who had surreptitiously watched over him before, were far away in the cafeteria now.

Dodging them with a made-up errand to take care of, Kyousuke had slipped off alone.

That meant that even in a worst-case scenario, he could not expect any help to come…

"Ah, shit…I'm scared. She's late…really, don't play around with me like this."

His pulse beat quickly with extreme anxiety and tension.

His clenched fists were sweaty in his pockets.

And then…

"Well, hello there. My apologies for making you wait."

From behind him came a *male* voice that Kyousuke instantly recognized.

"……?!"

Stepping out from the shadow of the building, waving his hand in greeting as he approached, was a fair-skinned, beautiful, brown-haired boy.

Most of his bandages had been removed, but he was still a pitiful sight, with big gauze pads and plasters stuck all over his face and arms. Despite his battered condition, the boy's expression was cheerful.

Kyousuke's bad hunch turned into chills, creeping up his spine.

"…Shinji? Why are you—" Before he could finish his question, a group of students appeared behind Shinji, following him out of the shadow of the building.

One, two, three, four…including Shinji, there were six altogether. All of them were boys and probably all first-year students, too; he remembered catching sight of these faces in the classrooms and hallways of their school building.

And that wasn't all. From the shadows on the opposite side, yet more boys appeared,

cutting off Kyousuke's escape route. This group, too, was exactly six people—at its head stood Oonogi and Usami. Every one of them glared at Kyousuke like they might pounce at any moment.

Shinji shrugged and stuck out his tongue like he was trying to make a joke. "Ah, perhaps, could you already be promised to someone? My apologies…heh-heh-heh. But I'm pleased, Mr. Kamiya. You came alone exactly as requested. As you might expect, guys like us don't much fancy the thought of taking on all of your dangerous little group at once, you see."

"…Ah, is that it? I see."

Standing in front of Shinji, who was grinning from ear to ear, Kyousuke realized—he had been set up. Shinji had no doubt asked a friend in Class B to write the note calling him out, in order to lure him out here for an ambush. And he'd walked right into it…

*If I screw this up, I'll probably be killed. Th-this is bad!! This is checkmate…my whole life is probably in checkmate!! Hey, come on, what do we do? What do we do, Kyousuke?! Think!* Even as he maintained his outward composure, Kyousuke's mind was on the verge of panic.

His classmates were practically salivating, full to the brim with bloodlust. Every one of their eyes were ablaze, shining with the fires of anticipation. Just as the girls were jealous of Renko flirting with Kyousuke—the boys were *jealous of Kyousuke getting that kind of affection and wanted to see him dead*.

"Kamiya! You're getting too cocky, you bastard! You're always being waited upon by those girls who follow you around… Don't show off, asshole!! I'll kill ya…I'll definitely destroy you!"

"Hee-hee-hee…real-life killing…real-life dissection…hee-hee…unreal…"

"I won't put up with it anymore, I'm at the limits of my patience! Forget that gas mask–wearing pervert…to have two beautiful girls hanging off of you, and on top of that getting new love notes every day?! Die. I mean it—die!"

"Kamiya, you are burdened with too many sins…at least, let me put you to sleep with these hands! Now you may dance in ecstasy to your heart's content, my beloved Azrael! Take him as your victim and devour this unclean creature! Heh-heh-heh…! Mua-ha-ha-ha…! Haaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Flinging sunglasses aside, licking lips, stamping feet in frustration, preparing to use his left arm—

Twelve killers sidled up to him.

Though none of them carried a deadly weapon, in their eyes shone madness, enough to make Kyousuke wince. Standing toward the back of the group, Shinji brushed back his hair in obvious self-satisfaction.

"You're in too deep, Mr. Kamiya. They say the nail that sticks up gets hammered down, and that nail is you. Of course, nobody expected you to stand out in quite this way…heh-heh-heh. But that's not really a problem, now is it?" Shinji said, spreading his arms dramatically. "You've killed twelve ordinary people. Killing twelve murderers should be no big deal, right? Well, then, please try to kill us!! If you don't—" Shinji raised his right hand and snapped his fingers with a loud *crack*.

On cue, the other boys pulled out the weapons they'd been hiding. Carving knives, scissors, utility knives, daggers, drills…and more. All of them gleamed dangerously.

"…You're going to die yourself! Heh-heh-heh!"

Flashing a sadistic smile, Shinji slowly folded his arms. It seemed like he had no intention of getting his own hands dirty; he was not even holding a weapon.

"You see these weapons, Kamiya?" Shinji continued, as if to use words themselves as weapons. "We got them from a *certain friend*, using the black market. Here in prison, smuggling weapons is similar to smuggling in luxury items. That is to say, it's quite dangerous and difficult to move this many of them, but…it seems that our *friend* also does not think too highly of you, you see? We got the goods moved by promising extraordinary compensation. The price was—" The smile disappeared from Shinji's face as his bloodshot eyes opened wide.

"Dealing with you *once and for all*, Mr. Kamiya."

His words were blunt. Dealing with Kyousuke once and for all—committing a new murder inside an institution meant to rehabilitate murderers—he said it as though it were nothing.

"…Wha—?" Kyousuke's mind drew a blank. The pack of murderers in school uniforms approached him with insanity in their eyes and deadly weapons in their hands. Confronted with such a sight, Kyousuke found he couldn't move a muscle.

Shinji kept him fixed with expressionless eyes. Involuntarily, he'd begun to tremble. "Well, then, won't you please show me, Mr. Kamiya? Show me your skills as the Warehouse

Butcher, that is. Killer of twelve…how many of *us* do you think you can kill in the end, hmm? Heh-heh-heh." Again, he smiled broadly.

"Kyousuke Kamiya! Just shut up while we end you!"

Brandishing a gleaming butterfly knife, Oonogi fumed with rage.
With Shinji abstaining, eleven murderers rushed at Kyousuke.

X X X

"Bwah?!"

The right straight punch, thrown with all his might, caved in the side of his opponent's face. Knocked into the copse of trees and spraying a mix of spittle and blood, Oonogi skidded to a stop, unmoving.

Bracing himself against the momentum that threatened to pitch him forward with the force of the follow-through, Kyousuke surveyed the scene, breathing hard. It had been maybe ten minutes since the fight had started. However…

"Hah…hah…," Kyousuke panted, hands on his knees. "This…is…less of a big deal… than I thought…huh…?" Catching his breath, Kyousuke raised the corners of his mouth into a bold grin.

Among the eleven murderers who had attacked him, only one remained, cowering on the ground, holding his uninjured left arm and making a fuss. "Calm down! Hush now, Azrael!

This…this bastard, when he gets too excited, his power explodes…! Grraaahhh!!"

The others had already had their fill of violence at Kyousuke's hand. Not one of them lying there even so much as twitched. Without exception, every one of them was out cold, eyes rolled back in their heads.

Looking around at his miserable comrades, Shinji held his forehead and sighed. "What useless boys they were! I mean, really… Or maybe I should ask, Mr. Kamiya: Are you some kind of monster? That this many people still failed to kill you is, how should I say…highly abnormal." He practically spat the words, glaring at Kyousuke with rage.

"I'm no monster…," Kyousuke answered. "You're all just too weak, you murderers." His uniform and hair were in unbelievable disarray. Countless lacerations of various sizes crisscrossed his skin, and blood stained his clothing.

It was nothing serious. The sheer number of cuts looked like a big deal, but most of them were nothing more than scratches. Even his fading strength would probably soon recover, fueled by adrenaline and violent momentum. To Kyousuke, who had walked away from any number of fights in the past, trouble like this was barely trouble at all.

They may have been murderers, but when it came to a fight, these boys were total amateurs. Kyousuke couldn't help but laugh. *Is that it?*

"…Well? What now? There are only the two of you left, Shinji!"

"Two of us? …Ah. You didn't bother with this useless idiot, hmm? But come to think of it…" Looking past the other boy, who was still talking to his own left arm, Shinji grew quiet. Then, biting his lip, his head hung down, his shoulders began to shake. "…Hee…! Hee-hee…! Eh-heh-heh…! Hee-ha…! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha…!" Scornful laughter burst forth from

his crescent mouth.

Both Kyousuke and the boy who was holding his left arm looked at Shinji in confusion. "…What's so funny?" Kyousuke demanded in a low voice.

Shinji immediately halted his loud laughter and raised his head to face Kyousuke. His expression, filled with joyful arrogance, caused the chill of a bad premonition to run up Kyousuke's spine.

"What's so funny? Heh-heh…! Of course it's funny…heh-heh-heh! I told you already, didn't I, Mr. Kamiya? You said, 'There are only the two of you left,' but, you see, Mr. Kamiya…" Shinji narrowed his eyes. His gaze did not fall on Kyousuke, but rather on the scene behind him.

"Ah, shit… Oww! You really got me, Kamiya…I'm definitely gonna wreck you!"

"Hee-hee-hee… You really hit me. Even my dad never hit me that hard…hee-hee-hee…"

"I won't forgive you. Iwon'tforgiveyouIwon'tforgiveyouIwon'tforgiveyou…ever!"

Several of the other students had recovered and once again clutched weapons in their hands, expressions filled with bloodlust.

Shinji sneered, stifling the laughter in his pale throat.

"As you can see, you *have yet to kill a single one of us*! I'm beginning to wonder if you really have it in you, Mr. Kamiya. And you're supposed to be the butcher of twelve? Heh-heh-heh."

"……?!"

Shinji had hit the bull's-eye. Kyousuke wasn't the Warehouse Butcher…he was nothing more than an ordinary person, and he had no intention of killing his opponents. Even if he felt like he wanted to kill someone, Kyousuke hadn't committed murder—he couldn't.

Shinji's smile intensified as Kyousuke ground his teeth in frustration. "…Well, what will you do? You'll be killed if you continue on like this!"

Even the boy on the ground holding his left arm, perhaps inspired by Shinji's rhetoric, began to work himself up into a frenzy, saying, "Hmm…so you finally calmed down, Azrael. You're such a troublesome fellow. Well, then, bite at him to your heart's content! Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!" In his other hand, he hoisted a nail-studded bat.

Surrounding Kyousuke now were five boys altogether, including Shinji. Most of them were wounded, but the murderous rage in their eyes was just that much stronger for it.

With a slight, unconscious flinch, Kyousuke spit out his fear along with his saliva and glared at the boys surrounding him. "Of course…of course, I don't have even the slightest intention to kill you assholes! But…I also don't intend to be killed! If there's anyone here who thinks they can take me out, give it a try!! With scum like you, half a killing is plenty! But until you lose the ability to stand up on your own, I'm gonna whale on you—"

Interrupting Kyousuke's angry shout, Shinji reached into his blazer, fishing for a weapon of his own.

"Oh, is that so? Well, then, why don't you go ahead and do that…hee-hee-hee!"

From an inside pocket, he pulled a crude revolver.

"Eh?! G…a gun?! Are you serious…?" The absolutely unexpected sight of a firearm sapped all of Kyousuke's hot-blooded energy in an instant. Kyousuke had walked away from many fights, but this was the first time he'd ever had a gun pointed at him.

Shinji leveled the pistol at Kyousuke with both hands. "Of course, I'm quite serious, Mr. Kamiya! The friend who so kindly acquired this weapon for me, along with the rest of us here, all of us…we all earnestly intend to kill you!" Shinji cocked the hammer with a loud click. "I've been able to stack the deck a bit in my favor, you see! In the unlikely event that we fail to finish you off, we're all facing pretty serious *discipline*, so we really have no choice." He glared at Kyousuke with bitter, steady brown eyes.

"……"

*If I don't escape*, Kyousuke thought, but he couldn't turn his attention away from the revolver. As if engulfed by the darkness of the gun barrel, the inside of his mind was shrouded in the deep black of despair.

"That's a nice face, Mr. Kamiya… You're probably tired by now, too, right? So I'm going to make it easy for you. Death is an eternal rest, you know." Shinji sneered, pink gums visible. "If you were a girl, I would give you the honor of violating you after strangling you to death with my own hands, but…so sorry, eh? Hee-hee-hee!"

Behind Shinji, the dense copse of trees was shrouded in shadow despite the daylight, and the gloom seemed to symbolize the darkness filling the gang's murderous hearts. *Well…this is it. I'm going to die here.* For a moment, in the darkness that contracted and expanded as the trees swayed in the wind, Ayaka's image floated up in his mind.

"Well, then, good night, Mr. Kamiya…sweet nightmares!" His face cold and cruel, Shinji

moved his finger to the trigger.

*"...Just die."*

A figure burst from the shadows of the trees, little more than a blur of movement, closing on Shinji faster than the eye could follow.

"…Don't move." Quickly and gracefully, the figure was upon him, its left hand covering his mouth while the right pressed against his throat, ready to take him down. The long, supple fingers were tipped with beautiful scarlet nails. "If you move, I'll kill you… *I'll crush your throat in.* Now, be a good boy, and give me that revolver."

Shinji stiffened, eyes open wide. Kyousuke and the other murderers stood dumbfounded, bewildered at this sudden development. With everyone's eyes on her, restraining Shinji from behind, was—

"That goes for you, too, assholes. Nobody move…if you value this guy's life, that is."

She wore a uniform with a short skirt and a rust-red wavy ponytail. Squinting her eyes, the same color as her hair, she seemed more displeased than usual.

"Wh-what…why are you here—Eiri?"

"…No reason. I only came to check out the situation. Speaking of which, why are *you* here? And why haven't you killed anybody?" Her voice sounded more irritated than usual.

“Covered in so many wounds…you’re the Warehouse Butcher. Just what are you waiting for? Why should I have to bother…?” She clicked her tongue in displeasure.

Shinji seemed to finally realize who exactly had him by the throat. His eyes, wavering with shock and agitation, regained their composure in a twinkle. “Heh-heh…now, please don’t embrace me without warning, Miss Eiri… Don’t you think I might get excited? Your fingers are chilly, and they feel so good… Tell me, how are mine?” He tossed the revolver away, and his now-empty hand crept toward Eiri’s exposed thigh.

“Move another centimeter, and I’ll slice you to ribbons.”

She pressed one of her nails into his skin, drawing bright red blood.

“……?!”

Catching his breath, Shinji stiffened once again. The crowd of murderers was tense with fear and anticipation. *She’s unarmed, so how did she—?* Eiri laughed scornfully at her bewildered spectators.

“…Hmph…*amateurs*. A lethal weapon only has value so far as it can be concealed. Kill without letting your target know of its existence until the final moment. Each and every one of you prepared an ostentatious weapon… Haven’t you ever heard of a surprise attack? A truly lethal weapon would be… In the moment you realize it’s a weapon, just as soon as you realize it’s a weapon, once you’ve realized it’s a weapon, you’re already dead. *Like my nails*.”

Eiri’s nails. Her nails were beautiful, with a foundation of bright red polish, ornamented

with multicolored rhinestones and Swarovski crystals, the pointed ends bordered with black. *Bordered with—black-luster steel*.

"*Suzaku* fingernail blades. *Ultra-thin, miniature Japanese blades attached to the tips of my fingernails*. They can slice right through wood, plastic, and of course flesh and bone as easily as butter. Three fingers on each hand, index, middle, and ring finger, wear these tiny blades. Six in all—that's my deadly weapon."

Eiri's eyes, which were now wide open, gleamed like naked steel. Sharpened to a diamond edge, they were the crystallization of her sheer, murderous will.

The bewilderment that had spread among the murderers turned to shock—then fear.

Eiri Akabane. She was a slasher who had killed six people, the true top of the class.

This was the first time that Kyousuke had seen her terrible glory with his own eyes.

"…Do you know why I'm telling you about my deadly weapon before I kill you? It's because showing you my weapon before I kill you is, in a way, a warning. I'm giving you a second chance. Though I'd be happy to just slash you right now… Keeping my nails so pristine can be a real pain. If you swear not to come near us again after this—I'll overlook this for you this one time."

Eiri glared at them, murder flashing in her coppery-red eyes. The boys encircling Kyousuke seemed to falter slightly at the sight of her bloodthirsty gaze.

"H-hey…what do we do?" "Are those eyes for real?" "Gyaaah?! My left arm…" "But there's only one of her." "Plus it's a girl." "Plus, hee-hee, she's so flat chested…hee-hee-

hee."

A restless light glistened in Eiri's eyes. "…I see. Then, I'll start by killing this one. First, I'll push my finger into your kidney area. A lot of nerves are gathered there, so this will hurt so badly you'll wish you were dead! You'll convulse with intense, gut-wrenching pain, and once your body collapses and you're pinned to the ground, I'll slit open your belly for you… cutting open your skin and tearing through your flesh, shaving off your fat and slicing up your bones, churning up your internal organs—"

"I g-g-get it! Please stop! I'll do as you say, so stop!" Shinji cried, interrupting Eiri's dispassionate monologue. All of the color had drained from his face, and it seemed like the rest of his murderous entourage had lost their nerve as well.

Eiri smiled in satisfaction as she delicately traced a finger from Shinji's throat down to the side of his abdomen, just where his kidney would be.

"…Ehh, is that so? Well, that's fine if you get it, but only if you *really do* get it. After all, you're a cowardly fool who can't do anything more than torment helpless prey, so… Hey, you guys! Pick up those idiots sleeping over there, and get out of here. Once you've done that, I'll let this one go… Now, get lost!"

No one dared defy Eiri's orders. Discarding their weapons and shouldering their unconscious comrades, they ran away as fast as they could. As he was leaving, Oonogi spat out a reckless parting remark. "I…I'll remember this, tiny tits!"

But Eiri just glanced at him and snapped back, shaking her fist, "Tiny tits are the best! Cutting boards reign supreme! A cups are seriously great!" An instant later and he was gone with the rest of them.

Her anger beginning to dissipate, Eiri let out a small sigh as she kicked the revolver away. "…Well, that happened. Now you disappear, too. Never start something with me again, Shinji, you laughable pervert. I don't want to sully my perfect nails with your filthy blood." With that, she kicked Shinji square in the back as hard as she could.

"Gyah!!" Shinji pitched forward from the kick, falling awkwardly to all fours. With his head hung low, the boy's expression was not visible. Was it fear or something closer to shame—? His body trembled slightly. His grasping fingers dug into the dirt on the ground.

"Heh…hee-hee…hee…ha-ha…fwa-ha-ha…" Eerie laughter echoed up from Shinji's still-bleeding throat. "I understand, Miss Eiri…I will never again meddle in your affairs. Only…" Slowly standing, Shinji turned to face Eiri again; his sick smile was so wide that it threatened to tear his face apart. "Please remember this *very* well. Going forward, if you should happen to die, Miss Eiri…I *will* be putting my hands on *you*! Like flies and hyenas, I will sniff out the scent of death and do just as I please with your body once it has become a corpse…heh-heh-heh."

"……"

"Until then, good-bye. So that I might rush to your side at the moment of your death, I will always be sniffing around… Won't you please remember that *very* well, Miss Eeeiri?" Leaving his words to linger like the promise of a curse, Shinji turned on his heels and calmly walked away.

Glaring at the retreating rapist, Eiri snatched the revolver up off the ground and, with one hand, casually aimed it at Shinji's back. "You'd better die before me… Bang." She pretended to pull the trigger, then shrugged. Her harsh, half-lidded eyes, as always, seemed

to take no heed of the words Shinji had left behind…

Kyousuke was once again reminded that Eiri was one person whom he absolutely did not want to have as an enemy.

X X X

"…Tch. You're pathetic, Kyousuke. Don't fall apart." Eiri advanced toward where Kyousuke sat leaning against the wall of the gymnasium. Mindful of her hidden blades, she pushed her hair back using her thumb and pinkie finger and looked down at him sternly.

"…So this is our top-of-the-class murderer? What a joke! Never mind twelve people, you didn't even kill *one*. If you'd wanted to, you should have been able to take out any number of them, so…why?"

"Uh, well…that's, you see—"

*I want to, but there's no way that I can answer her truthfully.* Even less so after he had found out Eiri's secret to success as the Scarlet Slasher. Kyousuke kept silent and averted his gaze, and Eiri let out another sigh.

"…You're difficult to understand, you know that? You've killed twelve people, and yet, in a strange way, you're charming. This time, you didn't bother to tell us honestly that you had been called out… And you even made up an excuse to get away. You were acting strange, and when I secretly came to see what was going on…you were going to go and get yourself killed. It doesn't make any sense…what was that about?" Kicking at the dirt with her toes, Eiri prattled on in irritation.

Yet Kyousuke searched Eiri's face for any indication that she had been worried about him. Her half-lidded eyes were only sleepy, and he detected none of the sharp bloodlust that had been there a short while ago. Like a sword returned to its scabbard, she had completely returned to being normal Eiri.

A girl who, while appearing sullen, in reality was always worrying over other people. He understood her far less now after seeing her behave as the Scarlet Slasher. *Why would Eiri act this way—?*

"I may be strangely charming, but aren't you just the same way? You're a cutthroat who has murdered six people, and on top of that, you fuss over using the blades on your nails to kill. Why did you take it upon yourself to come save me? And not just me, but Maina, too. You're always meddling in one thing or another! In the end, you threatened them, but you didn't kill anyone, either."

"……"

Eiri raised her eyebrows high, frowned, and kept quiet for a moment. After a brief silence, she looked down at Kyousuke, scoffing. "Huh…? Don't lump me in with you! The reason I let those guys live was because I decided that just threatening them was enough. I was entirely prepared to slit his throat. Compared to you, who had no inclination to kill in the first place, I'm…different. Mostly, I'm—"

Stopping for a moment, Eiri looked hard at her fingernails. Ingeniously camouflaged, she had kept these deadly weapons hidden until now. Devised solely for stealthy slaughter, her nails were razor-sharp works of art. The fingernail blades, "Suzaku." They were the culmination of Eiri's exceptional fastidiousness toward the art of murder.

"I'm no amateur killer—" she mumbled, still staring at her deadly nails. "I'm a professional."

"…Huh?" Kyousuke clearly had no idea what Eiri was saying. "A professional…at killing?"

"Yeah, that's right. A hit man. Though in my case, 'assassin' is more appropriate. People who kill in the course of some individual event, or who do it as a hobby, those are amateurs. Those of us who take requests and orders to carry out kills are professionals. …That's why I don't kill people recklessly. I'm not in the habit of cheap murder, with no reason or significance or profit. Surely you understand that I'm not an amateur, having seen my concealed weapons?"

Closing one eye, Eiri held up her brightly colored nails. It was too refined a weapon for an amateur to wield, but it seemed reasonable that Eiri would use it as a professional. There was one question, however, that needed to be answered.

"Supposing you're not just a killer, but a professional one—an assassin, as I understand it. At least, I think I understand it… Then, why are you in a place like this? Purgatorium Remedial Academy is a facility for rehabilitating killers, isn't it? Isn't it strange that someone like you would be here?"

Eiri grimaced at Kyousuke's inquiry. "…Hmm." After standing there quietly for a short while, she sullenly looked away. "…Not particularly. There's no special reason for it. I just *screwed up*, that's all. I was witnessed doing a job by an ordinary person, and I got caught, nothing more. Don't ask me anything else about it. Okay?"

She glanced at him, glaring with half-lidded eyes.

Kyousuke couldn't say another word, pinned under that strong gaze.

"…"

"…"

For a short while, a delicate silence descended between the two, alone together in the quiet shade behind the school gym—but it was quickly broken by the chime signaling the end of lunch period and the start of the rest of the day.

X X X

"…and that's the reason for it. And that's basically what capital punishment is—"

"Sorry I'm late." The door in the front of the classroom opened with a clatter, and Eiri stepped through.

At the chalkboard, Kurumiya's smooth writing came to an abrupt stop.

The students' eyes quietly gathered on the intruder.

"Oh…Eiri," Maina wondered, her eyes growing wide.

Shinji, Usami, and Oonogi stiffened visibly.

Without bothering to look at them, Eiri yawned softly, facing Kurumiya, who had not moved from her place in front of the blackboard. "…I'm late because during lunch I saved Kamiya from getting killed by these guys and then stopped by the infirmary on my way back." She threw down the assorted weapons that Shinji and his lackeys had pulled out earlier.

Among them, lying on the podium behind Kurumiya, was Shinji's revolver.

"Eeeek!! A g-gg-g-gun?!" Maina's hysteric shriek led the uproar that engulfed the class. Shock, excitement, and confusion… Even among this crowd of murders, it was likely the first time that most had seen a real firearm.

In the midst of the tumult, in a severe voice that demanded attention, Eiri addressed Kurumiya, who had yet to move. "Is it acceptable for such contraband to be circulating among the student body, Ms. Kurumiya? If you happen to have any free time in between disciplining latecomers, would you please do something about this? Luckily, Kamiya wasn't hurt, but—" Looking over her shoulder, Eiri frowned. "What were you doing out there, anyway?"

Kyousuke's bandage- and gauze-covered face peeked out from around the door, where he had been watching events play out. "Ah, sorry… Geez, you really have a way of putting things, don't you…?" Feeling the pressure of Eiri's reproachful gaze, he turned away.

*Talking in that brazen manner, in such a snappy tone…won't that rub Kurumiya's nerves the wrong way?* With a glance at his teacher, who for some reason had still not moved an inch, not even to acknowledge Eiri's words, Kyousuke took a timid step into the classroom.

*Snap!* Like a desiccated bone, the stick of chalk in Kurumiya's hand shattered.

"…I see. You've had your say. Yes, I understand very well." Crushing the remaining chalk in her hand, Kurumiya turned to Kyousuke and Eiri, a faint smile adorning her cherubic face. "…And?" she demanded in a low, girlish voice. "Is that all you wanted to say?" In the opposite hand from the one that had crushed the chalk, she gripped her menacing iron pipe.

"Eh? Hang on…why are you disciplining *us*?!" Kyousuke sputtered. "We're just the victims here—!"

"Yes, that's right. Now, I'm sure that's all you have to say?"

Even as Kyousuke began to back away, Eiri took a big step forward, her expression calm. "…Is there a problem? No, of course there's not," she answered in her usual nonchalant voice. Kurumiya's eyebrows twitched. "Kamiya is late because he was almost killed by other students, the fault for which lies in the failure of you teachers to provide proper supervision. If you're going to discipline someone, you should start with those assholes who attacked Kamiya."

"……Hmph." Faced with Eiri's fluid verbal attack, Kurumiya puffed out her cheeks and stayed silent.

Like this, the two of them looked just like a pouting child and her mother, who refused to buy a new toy.

*A-amazing! ...Eiri's actually defying Kurumiya!* Just as one would expect from a professional assassin. Her nerve was extraordinary.

Eiri took another step forward and looked down at the shorter Kurumiya. "Clearly, Kamiya is injured. Isn't it natural for him to attend class *after* receiving medical care? And I think he's done enough just by showing up at all. Most students wouldn't come to class if they were going to be beat all to hell and back every time!"

Shrugging, Eiri looked at the vacant seat in the front row. The barely recognizable remains of a desk and chair, still covered in patches of dried blood, belonged to Mohawk. Just today—first during morning correctional duty and again during third period—he had

been disciplined twice already and sent to the infirmary. When Kyousuke and Eiri had stopped there earlier, he had not yet regained consciousness and was hooked up to an artificial respirator, resting peacefully on a hospital bed.

"Mohawk, hmm?" Kurumiya mused, following Eiri's gaze to the ruined desk. "…That's right. I was thinking it's about time to actually kill that asshole." As she spoke Mohawk's name, she made a hateful expression. The pressure radiating from her body abated slightly.

*It must be because her rage is directed at Mohawk. Perhaps that's just what Eiri planned.*

"…Hmph. That's enough. If you can, please overlook Kamiya's lateness."

Finally, Kurumiya broke the tension. Shouldering the iron pipe and taking a step back, she motioned for Kyousuke to pass. "Look, hurry up and take your seat. And as for the idiots who attacked Kamiya, I intend to smash you all later… But time is short! Back to your lessons!" she spat, eyes fixed on the gun lying on the podium.

Eiri watched Shinji and his lackeys pale at Kurumiya's promise of punishment with satisfaction. Relaxing her severe expression, she casually moved to take her seat—

"Where are you going? *I don't remember saying that I would overlook your tardiness, too, Akabane!*"

"……?!"

It was a fierce tone of voice. Eiri had stopped walking, and Kurumiya swung the iron pipe at her face. There were no preparatory movements. It was a supersonic blow,

indescribable except as a blur.

"—Shit!!"

Eiri evaded the strike by a hair's width. Tilting her head ever so slightly, she let the pipe sail past, and in the instant that Kurumiya's arm extended toward her, she had closed the distance between them to nothing.

"…What are you doing, Ms. Kurumiya?"

Eiri asked in a quiet voice, the nails of her right hand pressed against Kurumiya's throat. Her rust-red eyes bore into the smaller woman from above.

"…Oh?" Her eyes open wide, Kurumiya's stiff cheeks slowly opened into a wide grin. Her childish laughter echoed through the otherwise silent classroom. "What am I doing, you ask…interesting. That's an odd choice of words for someone threatening a teacher with fingernail blades. I should ask you, Akabane, what are *you* doing? I wonder if you're prepared for what's coming to you."

Even with Eiri's nails thrust into her throat—and apparently well aware that they were concealed weapons—Kurumiya was not perturbed. Rather, she looked up at Eiri with a predatory gaze.

"……"

Facing down her teacher, Eiri remained silent.

"Heh-heh-heh…well, then," Kurumiya continued. "Since you tried so hard, I'll give you some options. One… You obediently remove your hand and then face discipline. Two… You

are forced to remove your hand and then face discipline. Three… *You kill me now and avoid discipline*. Those are all of your choices. You may choose your favorite."

On hearing the third option, Eiri's eyes widened. Biting her lip, she glared at Kurumiya. "…Kill a teacher? You must be joking. There's no way I could get away with something like tha—"

"I don't mind."

"…Huh?"

"You could kill me here and now and there would be absolutely no punishment carried out on you. Because of my incompetent supervision, your conduct would be overlooked, don't you think? …What is it? There's nothing for you to worry about. It would be impossible for you to kill me without my compliance. If you explain the situation to the institution, I'm sure they will handle it appropriately. Everyone in here is a witness. Therefore, don't hesitate—"

Kurumiya tossed aside the iron pipe and raised both of her hands. In a commanding tone that did not match her submissive posture, she ordered:

*"Kill me."*

"……?!"

That instant, Eiri's body jumped as though struck by an electric shock. The fingers pressed against Kurumiya's throat began to visibly tremble and shake.

"What is it? What are you scared of? If you're going to do it, then get on with it. You just

have to pull back your bladed fingertips all at once. That should be easy! If you are the Scarlet Slasher, that is. Heh-heh-heh…"

Grinning broadly, Kurumiya heaped on word after word as if to torment Eiri.

"I…I'm…"

Her rust-red eyes were wavering.

The sounds of shallow breathing came from her lips, and her face drained of blood.

"What? What happened, Akabane—Eiri Akabane. Should I help you along?" Speaking in a sweet, soft voice, Kurumiya started to take one step forward. Without the slightest hesitation, it looked like she was going to push Eiri's nails into her own throat—

"Ah… Wha—?!"

With a frustrated scream, Eiri pulled her hand away and stumbled backward, shaking. As she gathered her senses, she looked at Kurumiya's neck. The marks left by her fingernail blades were thin and shallow. Relief quickly passed over Eiri's expression, followed by despair, and finally, resignation. She bit her lip and hung her head low.

"___"

"Oh, is that so…? I see. So that's your choice, Akabane?" Kurumiya asked quietly. Her girlish smile long gone, she grabbed Eiri's right wrist and pulled the taller girl toward her.

"That's why you're a still a virgin—Rusty Nail,"

Kurumiya whispered in Eiri's ear as she struck her in the stomach with the blade of her hand.

"……?!"

A silent scream. Eiri's slender body folded in half.

Without a moment's delay, Kurumiya drove her left knee up into Eiri's lower jaw.

"Eiri?!" "Eiriiiiii!!" Kyousuke and Maina shouted simultaneously.

Her head thrown back, Eiri collapsed backward.

*Thud*.

She went down with a dull crash.

"Hey, you bastards. Shut up and watch… Don't move. If you move, I'll kill you." Kurumiya's low growling voice froze Kyousuke and Maina, who had immediately started to rush over, in their tracks. Her right hand once again held the iron pipe. As the two students watched through gritted teeth, she jabbed at Eiri's cheek with one bloodstained end. Eiri, lying face up, groaned.

"It was right for an injured person like Kamiya to go to the infirmary. I'll overlook that. …However, Akabane. What reason could you possibly have had to take it upon yourself to accompany him? He doesn't appear to have such severe injuries that he's unable to walk by himself… In the end, weren't the two of you secretly having some *fun* together? Hmmm?"

"Huh?! Wh-what are you saying…ubgh?!" Eiri opened her mouth to give voice to her objections, and Kurumiya plugged it with the iron pipe. She tried her best to turn her face away, but guided by Kurumiya's skilled hand, the tip stubbornly caught up with her and pressed against her lips. Along with Eiri's labored breaths, the iron pipe quickly became wet with her spit. "He—hey…mgh?! S-stop it…gnh!!"

"Oh-ho, what is it? You're blushing! Don't tell me you're a virgin *down there*, too? Heh-

heh-heh… Weeell, okay, then. If you are, I'll confirm it now. If you turn out to be 'pure,' I'll overlook everything. That'll stand as evidence that you weren't skipping class with Kamiya, yeah?" With a wicked smile, Kurumiya pulled the iron pipe out of Eiri's mouth. She moved to insert the end of the glistening weapon up under Eiri's skirt.

"Wha—?! S-stop…ahh—"

"Stop that, you perverted Lolita teacher."

Unable to stay quiet and watch any longer, Kyousuke grabbed Kurumiya's arm.

Her fun interrupted by the sudden grapple, Kurumiya repeated, "…Lolita?" as her thirst for blood rose before his eyes.

"Kyou—Kyousuke…"

"Quiet."

Eiri raised her body up as if she was going to say something, but Kyousuke did not take his eyes off of Kurumiya. Even faced with the horrible, fiendish, man-eating expression written across her charming childlike face, he spoke in a powerful voice.

"It was me. I'm the one who asked her. I asked her to accompany me to the infirmary. Before that, she saved my life. She didn't do one single thing to justify receiving punishment… I was the one. I was the one who was wrong! If you're going to discipline someone, it should be me, you stupid bitch brat!"

Kyousuke had barely finished shouting when Kurumiya's iron pipe struck him right on one gauze-covered cheek. "Gah!!" Knocked back, he collapsed on the floor. It was just short of a miracle that all of his teeth weren't broken. It was the first time that Kyousuke had tasted Kurumiya's pipe, and it was a complete shock. *Where did this physical strength come from in those slender arms?*

"Looks like you want to die after all…fine with me. Just as you want, I'll smash you to bits!" The next blow caught him in the stomach. It was a good thing he hadn't eaten today. Faster than he could vomit the gastric juices that came surging up past his throat, yet another swing caught Kyousuke in the side. As he realized that his ribs were probably broken—again a blow, this time on the thigh.

With Kurumiya's rage raining down nonstop pain on him, the world was painted red…

"Kyousuke?! Wa-wait, Kyousuke—!"

*Don't come over*. His consciousness quickly fading, Kyousuke tried to use his last bit of strength to hold Eiri back with a pleading look. Then his vision blurred, and he did not get the chance to see whether Eiri had heeded his warning. *Was I hit by a sideswipe just now? I*

*don't know.* His body flew up, the side of his head slamming into the wall, his sense of pain long ago overwhelmed.

Over and over and over and over—from above, below, left, and right it was one attack after another. Kyousuke's world tumbled violently as he was thrown about by the beating. With each blow, his consciousness faded further. A deep crimson abyss rushed up to engulf him.

"Hmm…it's over now, Kamiya. Go ahead and die now!"

*Wham!* A final, massive strike smashed into the side of his head, and the world began to dim and dissolve.

"Kyousukeeeeeeeeeeee?!" Echoing through the darkness, someone screamed—

Kyousuke lost consciousness.

X X X

A gentle light filtered through the iron bars that covered the window. The infirmary in which Kyousuke found himself regaining consciousness was quiet and still. Staring at the blotchy ceiling, he blinked several times, then slowly and tentatively pushed himself upright.

"…Kyousuke?" a thin voice spoke from somewhere next to him. Sitting in a folding chair, Eiri was looking at Kyousuke with an expression of surprise. Tears wavered in her rust-red eyes. "…Should you be trying to sit up? …I mean, are you all right?"

"Mm, yeah," he answered. "I'm better than expected, actually. I'm used to this. My body has always been sturdy, so, you know." Between his head, chest, and four limbs, he hurt in

so many places; however, Kyousuke was a fighter and was more than used to constant injury. If it was just the pain—if there was no permanent damage—it was tolerable.

Luckily, it seemed that he'd escaped without much more than cuts and bruises and a few fractured bones. *She must have been taking it easy on me.* Though imperfect, Kurumiya was still a teacher. No matter how many times she said, "I'll kill you," there was no way that she would actually murder a student. "Anyway, Eiri…are *you* okay? Things must have been difficult for you after that."

"…Not really," Eiri mumbled and averted her eyes. "…Everything's been normal since you were carried off to the infirmary. Just like after Mohawk was disciplined, nothing really changed. And nothing else has happened to me since that incident… Thanks to some idiot who protected me, that is. So…well…you see…" Eiri stumbled over her next words as though they were difficult even to say, then looked at him with upturned eyes.

"Tha…thank you, Kyousuke."

Her voice was soft, gentle even, and the pink flush to her cheeks made Kyousuke's pulse leap. "…D-don't mention it!!" he stammered, also scrambling to turn his face away.

Precisely because she was usually so aloof, he didn't see how it could be a good thing that she had suddenly started acting this way. Eiri seemed to be thinking the same thing, placing both hands on her knees and shutting her mouth up tight.

It was a situation that couldn't help but be awkward.

Kyousuke finally decided to change the subject.

"B-by the way…are classes over?"

"…Yeah." Eiri nodded, grateful to end the previous conversation.

"Uh, umm…what about Maina and Renko? They're not with you?"

"…No. I asked them, and they let me step away for a while."

"Oh, is that so…? Hey, when you say you asked…why did you come alone?"

"Because I had something I wanted to say to you…one on one." Eiri lifted her gaze to meet his, and in her rust-red eyes, Kyousuke could see a determined resolve.

"…Huh? Something you wanted to tell me? What is it? You went so far as to clear everyone else out…" Kyousuke's heart was beating fast with the possibilities that crossed his mind. Flustered, he surveyed his surroundings. Here in the infirmary, with its shelves of medicine, beds, and medical instruments, he felt no human presence besides the two of them. It looked like even the school nurse was absent.

Illuminated by the spring sunlight streaming in through barred windows, Eiri put her hands on the edge of the bed. "The truth is, Kyousuke, I…"

"Just a…w-wait! Wait just a minute, Eiri! I'm not sure if I'm ready for—"

Ignoring his blushing protests, she leaned her body forward.

*"I've never killed anyone."*

"…Huh…?" Kyousuke drew a complete blank; it had definitely not been the confession he was expecting. *She's never killed anyone? Eiri? No way. There's no way that can be true. I must have misheard her or something.* Eiri was a professional "assassin," after all.

"…The story that I've killed six people is bullshit. I've never even killed one person. I've really tried to, but I couldn't kill a single one of them… Six isn't the number of people I've killed. It's the number of people I *failed to kill*. I failed at the job of 'assassin'…see?" Eiri's lips twisted around the words into a smiling grimace of masochistic self-loathing.

Kyousuke took a deep breath as Eiri pressed her weaponized nails against his throat.

"…For generations, the Akabane family has been a noted family of assassins, loyally serving our masters. From the time I was very young, I was trained in the art of killing, but… It makes you laugh, doesn't it? I'm missing the most important thing—the nerve to kill. However, I did turn out to have a bit of talent, so I was given many chances… Each time I failed, I worked hard to see that it wouldn't happen again. Even so, in the end I couldn't go through with a kill. Then, on my most recent attempt—on what was supposed to be my sixth kill—I screwed up in a big way. Someone saw me, and I was arrested. Under the pretext of expelling me from the Akabane clan, they were happy to toss me in here."

Removing her nails from Kyousuke's throat, Eiri bit her lip.

Rubbing her bright red nails with the fingers of the opposite hand, she continued, "…The nickname they gave me was Rusty Nail. It's not because of rusty bloodstains, but because my nails are rusty from disuse. Rust leaving a body—to an Akabane, rust red leaving a body is the whole point! To think that defective goods like me were born into such a distinguished line…"

"Eiri, you…"

Kyousuke couldn't hide his confusion at Eiri's frail voice and expression. *It must be a lie? Could she really have not killed anyone, this girl?* Certainly, when Kurumiya had

ordered her to "kill me," Eiri's reaction had not been what one would expect of a seasoned murderer. She hadn't been shaken by Kurumiya's threats or anything like that… If she was simply afraid of the act of killing, that he could understand, but—

"Hey, Kyousuke…tell me. How do you kill? Just before you kill someone, the things that you think of… About that person, and the people who care for that person, and the people that that person cares for… I mean, you think of them, too, don't you? Even if you're only killing one person, once that person dies, so many more people might feel so heartbroken that death would be less painful… You're probably causing them pain, causing them sadness, causing them to feel bitter and hurt— Those are the kinds of things that I think of. Even in the tiniest moment, I think and I think and I think and I think and I think and I think and I think…and in the end, I can never take their life. …I can't finish the kill."

Eiri's head was bowed deeply, and she gripped the sheets of the bed with both hands. The pointed tips of her nails—six blades in total—tore at the thin fabric, cutting it to shreds. A drop of transparent liquid landed near her hand. A hint of a sob was barely audible.

"…Even so, on my last job, I managed to strike a vital area. I'd resolved myself to slit his throat from behind. A ridiculous amount of hot blood flowed out, and his face went pure white… I'd killed him, I thought. The moment I thought that, I blacked out. The rest is as I told you over lunch. I was arrested, and my target escaped death. I was abandoned by the Akabane family… Every day and every night became like living a nightmare. The fear I felt trying to kill him, the self-loathing… It's humiliating, but even now I can't sleep."

Eiri wiped her eyes, her voice full of derision. *So her eyes are always half closed because she was sleepy.* The rust-red orbs shimmered behind curtains of tears. Again she

looked at him entreatingly.

"Hey, Kyousuke…tell me! You've killed twelve people, haven't you?! Even a gentle guy like you was able to kill, right?! What do I do to become able to kill? Tell me…please. You're the only one I can ask. Maina never intends to kill in the first place and Renko is too mysterious…so I'm asking you, Kyousuke. Teach me? If you won't, I'll… As someone who was raised to kill, I…I won't have any reason to go on living. Don't you see?"

"……"

Kyousuke stared back at her in silence. Eiri had flung off the mask of the Scarlet Slasher and dropped the disguise of professional assassin; her real face was that of an ordinary, weak girl. Her aggressive, dismissive attitude was likely also a facade, a reflection of the fear and unease she felt in a world full of murderers. If that was the case…

Trusting in Eiri's clear, tear-soaked eyes, he prepared himself for the worst. Kyousuke resolved to expose his own true face as well, tossing aside his mask and showing himself just as he was.

"…I'm sorry. That's impossible, Eiri. I can't teach you something like that."

"What?! Why not?! Why won't you teach m—"

"Because I've never killed a single person."

"…Wha—?" Eiri put her hands on Kyousuke's shoulders and moved closer, stopping abruptly at his confession. Her mouth hung open in disbelief. It was probably the same face that Kyousuke had made earlier.

With a bitter smile, he continued. “The story about me killing twelve people…the truth is, that was a false charge. I’m a normal guy who’s never even shoplifted, much less killed anyone. I’m just a little more resilient against injury than most people is all. I’ve kept it a secret this whole time, but…with you, I think it must be okay to talk about it.”

“…False charge? …Normal guy? …Just a little more resilient?” Her expression moved from astonishment through confusion and then on to disappointment—or possibly, relief—and then bewilderment. “…You must be lying? At least, the last thing you said was definitely a lie…”

“I’m not lying. It’s all true. I have absolutely no idea how to answer questions about killing people. But—” He took Eiri’s hands that were resting on his shoulders and, glancing at the nails that crowned her fingertips, gently removed them. “I completely understand what it’s like to hate the thought of killing. I find it unpleasant, but I also understand your determination in feeling like you have to kill. You’re thinking all kinds of things, so you can’t kill your target? Of course you are! People who can kill without thinking are insane. Murderers and hit men…am I wrong?”

“You’re wrong.” Eiri cut him down immediately. With eyes as sharp as swords, she glared at Kyousuke. “…That kind of reasoning belongs in *polite society*, doesn’t it? Here in the *underworld* where we’re living, being unable to kill is insane. It’s the exact opposite of the ordinary world in logic, morals, and truth. The worlds that you and I inhabit are too different. And if our worlds are different, our value systems…”

“Value systems? We’re the same there, too, though. You stand out in criminal society, but you’re normal in decent society. You’re no different from me… I mean, what were you going

to do if you were actually rehabilitated here? If you stuck it out for three years and were let out back into the ordinary world—"

"That's impossible…absolutely impossible."

"Why would it be?! Your family turned their backs on you, didn't they? Even so, they're… They wouldn't just throw someone like you away, would they? When you already know so much? It seems like washing your hands of them would be tough."

"…You're wrong. It's not like that. Even so, there is one reason, but…" Turning her face away, Eiri hesitated.

"But?" Kyousuke urged her on.

Still not meeting his eyes, she continued. "…Look. You were thrown in here on a false charge, right? The world you came from, that place…do you want to go back? Say that starting now, for the next three years, you carry on behaving as the Warehouse Butcher and endure this life…even then, the place that you think you want to return to, the place where you belong, will it be there for you?"

"—Yes, it will be." Kyousuke held the image of his beloved family in his mind and felt the strength fill his voice and his fists. He wouldn't be broken until he had seen Ayaka again, until he had apologized to her. He would absolutely not give in.

"……Really." Eiri's eyes had clouded over, her voice a soft mumble. Pursing her lips and carving wrinkles into her forehead, she looked extremely indecisive.

Kyousuke stayed silent and continued to watch her attentively. Ten seconds passed, then twenty, then thirty— "…I get it. If that's the case, then I have to tell you."

In the brilliance of Eiri's open eyes, Kyousuke gasped unconsciously. They held a cold,

ruthless light. Her icy-sharp gaze seemed to pierce him through. “First, you’ll forgive me for starting from the conclusion, but… Even supposing that you do stick it out for the three years, *you will never be able to go back to your former world*.”

“……Huh? No, I’m going back. I mean, this place is to rehabilitate murdere—”

“—Wrong.” Cutting off Kyousuke’s words, Eiri told him the truth.

His hope was a spider’s thread that he clung to in this hellish purgatory, filled with the clamor of murderers. She delivered the truth that would cut the thread and send him tumbling to the bottom of the abyss.

“Purgatorium Remedial Academy is not a school that rehabilitates murderers… It’s a place where they take murderers who already have experience killing and retrain them, correcting any weaknesses or flaws— *It’s a vocational school for raising professional killers*.”

# Lucifer in the CocYtus

## THE BARE FACE OF PURGATORY AND THE CRAZY DEATH METAL GROWL

FIFTH PERIOD

Q. WHAT COLOR ARE YOUR PANTIES TODAY?

A. YOU'RE DEAD MEAT.

# Lucifer in the Cocytus

## THE BARE FACE OF PURGATORY AND THE CRAZY DEATH METAL GROWL

## FIFTH PERIOD

“Purgatorium Remedial Academy is a vocational school for killers…?”

It was a narrow room, illuminated by thin rays of light streaming in from a deeply recessed window. Seated behind a massive ebony desk, flanked by a pair of tall twin bookshelves, a cigarette-smoking figure sat, backlit, face shrouded in shadow. Somehow, he could tell the figure was smiling.

The silhouette chuckled quietly at Kyousuke, who still stood in the doorway, breathing raggedly. “And just where did you hear such a thing? Well, I can hazard a guess, but… First of all, settle down. You heard this story, and you flew directly here to find me, is that it? What a lively pig you are to disregard the fact that you would be immediately disciplined.”

“Cut the crap, Kurumiya…just answer the question.” Growling, Kyousuke took a step forward. He couldn’t hide the anger in his voice.

As the silhouette—as Kurumiya—had said, what he had heard from Eiri had sent him flying out of the infirmary in a fury. He’d needed to see Kurumiya, needed to know if it was

true. He'd found her, finally, on the fourth floor of the new school building, in one of the staff rooms granted to each teacher at the Purgatorium Remedial Academy.

Kyousuke tried to calm his labored breathing. "Is what I heard the truth? Answer me! Answer me now!" he demanded. "Even if I do survive to graduation, *I won't return to normal society, but the criminal underworld*? What the hell is that about?!"

Unshaken by Kyousuke's angry shouts, Kurumiya leisurely exhaled a puff of purple smoke. Pressing the butt of her cigarette into the ashtray, she stood. "I thought I told you on the very first day of class, Kamiya? Our objective here at the Purgatorium Remedial Academy is to beat the corrupted nature of murderers into shape and completely reform them. However…"

Making her way around the imposing desk, Kurumiya slowly approached Kyousuke. In her hand, she gripped the familiar iron pipe in place of the cigarette. Before long, she was looking up at him, grinning; it was obvious that she was enjoying his response immensely. "I don't recall saying that if you graduated you could return to the free world. And I *do* hate lying… I speak nothing but the truth! It's as you said, Kamiya—this place is precisely such an institution."

"Ehh?! You're full of shit!!" Furious, Kyousuke grabbed Kurumiya's collar in both hands, lifting her petite body off the ground.

Kurumiya's expression did not change. She still stared at Kyousuke with an amused expression. "Oh, scary, scary…heh-heh-heh! Are you thinking about killing me? Hmmm? Too bad that's impossible…*for a punk who's never killed before!*"

"Wh-why…how do you know that—?"

"Humans are fundamentally incapable of murder."

Still standing on her tiptoes, Kurumiya held Kyousuke's gaze, unflinching. Ignoring his wide-eyed question, she continued, expression calm and focused. "That's one of the ideas that forms the foundation for the theory of 'Killology.' It's because in every animal, there are instinctual mechanisms working to defend against the extinction of the species. In fact, it's said that when training soldiers on the battlefield, the most serious challenge is the problem of how to rid them of this aversion toward 'killing one's own.' That's how difficult it is, the act of killing another person. However—" Kurumiya's smile grew, taking on a fiendish quality, small white teeth peeking like fangs from the corners of her upturned lips.

"The murderers gathered here are different. *They've already overcome their aversions*. There are those who killed on an impulse, as well as psychopaths and the ones who are bred for it… No matter what type they are, if you can get them to go off once, the rest is easy. *If you can reform them so that they're easy to handle*, then you're good to go. Killers are very talented people, you know!"

"Wha……?" The hands wrapped around Kurumiya's neck slackened, letting her slip free. Staggering back in retreat, Kyousuke groaned, overcome with surprise. "What the hell…? You collect murderers to use like tools?"

"Yep, you've got it! Of course, there are exceptions. Like Rusty Nail, who, despite being born into a long line of assassins, isn't able to kill, and…virgins who have never killed, like you, Kamiya."

Kyousuke snapped back to reality when she spoke his name. If the students had been

collected on the premise that "they already had experience killing people," then there shouldn't have been any reason for Kyousuke to have been thrown into a place like this. *But here I am, so why?*

"That's right, you've never killed anyone. I knew from the very beginning that the thing about you killing twelve people was a false charge… If you want to know why, it's because from the start the crimes that you are supposed to have committed have been *crimes contrived by our board chairman for the purpose of having you charged*."

"……Huh? What the…what the hell do you mean by that?! Why on purpose…?"

"Heh-heh-heh… Isn't it obvious? He laid eyes on your aberrant physical abilities. The board wanted you badly enough to fabricate your crimes… Especially since your limiter is still in place, so depending on how they decide to train you…they could make you into just about anything. For example, if I were to *corner you in a situation where you had no option but to kill*…or something."

Kurumiya reached into her jacket pocket and retrieved something, holding it up for him to see. He recognized the crude shape, shining with a dark luster, as Shinji's revolver.

"…Really, today was so strange. I had hoped that if you took a beating from a group of murderers, you might knock off one or two of them in the course of self-defense, but…an unexpected obstacle appeared. *I went out of my way to put lethal weapons on the black market*, and none of those assholes even used them! They were as useless as Rusty Nail's threats."

"……?! That was your doing, Kurumiya?!"

*I guess when you think about who could possibly put that many lethal weapons into*

*circulation*— Clearly, it couldn't have been a student; a teacher had to have done it. It was like some sort of horrible joke.

Kyousuke moved to grab Kurumiya again, but she pacified him with a wave of the revolver. "Now, wait a minute. Calm down. I may be a teacher, but I'm on the bottom rung here. I'm just following orders from above. The ones you should blame are the chairman of this institution and…yourself. Blame your excessive physical strength *and your own foolishness at committing such flashy acts of violence that your strength became well-known even in the criminal underworld*… You see, Slayer? Or is it Megadeath, Kyousuke Kamiya?"

"Wha…?!" He froze, fingers clutching Kurumiya's lapel, and clenched his teeth. He'd been certain that, until now, he'd only thrown down with street hoodlums and small-time punks. He had not even the slightest association with the yakuza or any other organized gang.

"…It's *my* fault?" In the beginning, he'd only raised a hand to protect the people important to him, but before long, he'd come to rely on his fists above all else and had forgotten how to back down…

And then, ultimately, he was the one who hurt them. Ayaka, who he was supposed to protect over everything else, and—hurt himself, too. It was all because he had wielded his power without grasping its true extent.

"Are you saying that this is all my fault…? Dammit…!"

Kyousuke ground his molars, hands opening and then clenching into tight fists. There was nothing he could do. Not knowing what or who to blame, his fury had no direction, no outlet. It writhed and roiled in his gut.

"Oh, that's right…," Kurumiya added. "There's one thing that I forgot to tell you." Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

"…What is it?" Kyousuke growled, frowning. Kurumiya wore a sadistic smile.

"It's about the disguise that you were forced to wear—the disgusting mask of the Warehouse Butcher—and the asshole who was originally supposed to wear it. That person is a psycho murderer who thinks nothing about killing people by the dozens or hundreds, but… Do you know who I'm talking about, Kamiya?"

"…Huh? Do I know? As if I would know that!!" There was no way that someone he knew just happened to have killed hundreds of people without a second thought. *If I had to pick...probably Bob—but even for her, a three-digit kill count seems unlikely.*

"…Hmm, really? You don't know?" Kurumiya sounded disappointed. "But it's one of those *female students you've been getting along so well with* your whole time here. Heh-heh-heh…isn't that great? If you can't figure it out, I'll tell you. One day, you beat up twelve guys in an abandoned warehouse, and then the one who smashed them, and broke them, and crushed them, and tore them apart, and gouged them, and toyed with them, eviscerating them before killing and killing and killing and killing and killing and killing them all, that mass murderer was—"

Kurumiya's big round eyes narrowed.

And then, Kyousuke heard it.

The one person's name that he had least wanted to hear.

"—*Renko Hikawa!* The girl with the gas mask that you're always so friendly with! She's

the Murder Maid, a real veteran killer. She's not just the top of her class, she's the lethal instrument at the top of your whole year."

X X X

*She's lying.*

Running through the deserted school building, Kyousuke's mind screamed.

*She's lying, she's lying, she's lying, she's lying, she's lying, she's lying!*

The Renko he knew—a psycho killer wouldn't think anything of having a kill count in triple digits? That was completely impossible. It should be impossible. He didn't want it to be possible.

"Fine, why don't you go ask her yourself? Isn't she up on the roof? Heh-heh-heh…"

As soon as Kurumiya had said the words, Kyousuke had flown from her staff room, running like a madman. His pulse pounded so violently that it hurt.

*It must be a lie, Renko…please say it's not true! Please laugh it off like you always do!!*

The closer he came to his destination, the stronger his suspicion of Renko grew. The mysterious girl who wore her gas mask twenty-four hours a day. Her real face and her real nature—Kyousuke knew neither. Even if her eyes glittered with murderous intent despite her easy, friendly manner, Kyousuke wouldn't know it. Even if she were grimacing with

madness underneath the mask that laughed with a "*kksshh*," he wouldn't know…

"Hah…hah…geez…hah…" Standing in front of the gunmetal gray door that led to his destination, Kyousuke caught his breath. NO ENTRY was written across the portal in bright red paint, warning against access to the roof of the new school building. The lock was—open. He placed a hand on the knob and readied himself to push it open.

Bright light flooded in. Under a blue-gray sky, whipping his head around, he frantically looked for Renko. But in the narrow space enclosed by an iron fence and barbed wire, Kyousuke was alone.

"…Renko? Are you here? Heeey, Renkoooooo!" Calling her name, he paced about the small area, checking every nook and corner, all to no avail.

"…Seriously, what the hell. She's not here…"

It seemed that Kurumiya's prediction of Renko's whereabouts had been off. Breathing a deep sigh of relief and disappointment, Kyousuke allowed his fraying nerves to relax a moment before—

"Oh, sorry, sorry. Looks like I kept you waiting, hmm? *Kksshh.*"

The voice came from the doorway. Kyousuke, gripping the iron fence on the opposite side of the roof, turned around quickly.

"I heard the whole story from Kurumiya. She said you had some things you wanted to ask me?"

—There stood Renko, same as always. The girl in the black gas mask, who spoke in an

easygoing manner. Kyousuke was frozen in place, unable to react. So with an "ahem," Renko pushed out her abundant breasts.

"Anyway, I'm a G cup! *Kksshh.* That's what you wanted to ask me, isn't it? I thought it might be pretty hard for you to speak up and ask me yourself, so I went ahead and told you. Since you made the effort to come find me, should I give you the rest of my measurements? Starting from the top, they're—"

"Renko."

"Hmm? What is it? You've got such a grim face on. It feels like you might rush on me at any moment…oh! Kyousuke, surely you weren't scheming to do this and that, and even the other thing to me here in this deserted place—"

"—Renko!" Kyousuke shouted, unable to contain himself.

"Ah?!"

"…Quit joking around." He glowered at her gas mask. "What I wanted to ask you has nothing to do with that." He took a deep breath hoping to calm his ragged nerves. He gathered his strength in his clenched fists.

Perhaps picking up on the tone of the conversation, Renko grew quiet, letting out a muted "*kksshh*..." The sun slowly began to drop in the sky, and sunset painted the roof a brilliant ochre.

"Say, Renko—?" Kyousuke asked. "What I heard about your kills being in the triple digits…is that true?"

"…"

The silence was delicate.

After a little while, Renko tilted her head in thought. “Triple digits? I’m sorry, Kyousuke. I don’t know…I just don’t know.” Putting her finger to the chin of the gas mask, she lowered her voice. “The number of people I’ve killed up to now, *I just didn’t count them one by one*, you see. Even if you ask me like that, ‘Are your kills in the triple digits?’ I can’t give you a good answer. The only thing I can say is…”

She paused for a moment and removed her hood, allowing her silver hair to spill out and flutter in the wind. “I’ve killed more people than anyone at this school… I’m a better murderer than anyone here. Do you know why? Because *that’s what I was made for*. In other words, I’m—”

She threw off her blazer and hoodie, until her tank top was the only layer left. Covering every inch of her exposed arms were closely packed, jet-black tribal tattoos. The complicated designs, made of hundreds of lines interweaving in all directions, looked like chains wrapped around her.

“—I’m the Murder Maid. I exist for the sole purpose of killing people, *designed from the genetic level* to do just that. Like scissors are made to cut paper, like a hammer is made to hit nails, like a gun is made to shoot bullets… I was made for this purpose, and *I can do nothing but kill*. I kill because I hate. I kill because I’m sad. I kill because I’m happy. I kill because I’m lonely. I kill because I’m empty. I kill because it hurts. I don’t really understand it all, but I kill. I kill as the mood strikes me. I kill just because. I kill and I kill and I kill and I kill and I kill and I kill and I kill and I kill… Every single emotion I have *is associated with killing*. If it weren’t for this mask, well…get it?”

As she spoke, she removed her headphones, tossing the rough black equipment aside to

reveal delicate white ears. Then, she put both hands on her mask. Moving her arms around to the back of her head, detaching the bands that held it in place, Renko exhaled, a long "*kkkssshhh*..."

"This mask is a limiter that my creator put on me. It's a device to suppress the main factors that tie all of my actions to indiscriminate killing—my overwhelming murderous impulse and urge to slaughter. That is to say, only as long as I'm wearing this mask, I'm a normal girl. …But Kyousuke, if you say that you want to see the real me, I think it would be okay to show you. Ordinarily, of course, I can't take it off by myself, but…this time is special, so I got her to undo the lock!"

"R-Renko…" Kyousuke drew away, pressing his back against the iron fence.

Renko looked at Kyousuke, shaking with instinctive fear, and laughed. Or she felt like laughing. "Up to now, I've had all kinds of emotions, and when I have them, I kill, but…this is the first time I've ever had *this* feeling. I'm experiencing…interest in you. I can't help but be fascinated by you, and I can't pull my consciousness away from you. My head is full of you. I want to know you more fully, and I want you to know about me. I like you, Kyousuke… I love you! That's why—" *Kachink.* The sound of the restraints coming loose.

"—I want to savor the moment when this emotion becomes connected to *killing*."

The black mask, its bindings finally undone, fell away. Exposed, Renko's bare face was —so beautiful it was frightening.

"…"

He was captivated, his eyes drawn to her. Her silky smooth silver hair fluttered against the backdrop of a sky the color of fresh blood. In the approaching twilight, her dazzlingly white skin shone like glazed porcelain.

Her slim, beautiful eyebrows; her calmly closed eyelids; her eyelashes, so long that they cast a shadow; her high, shapely nose bridge; her charming peach-colored lips… Everything about her was weirdly, achingly beautiful.

If mankind were to use all of its skills and techniques to pursue the absolute essence of *beauty*, through the arts or some other means, this is likely the kind of face that would be created—so he thought.

"…Ren…ko…"

As if in answer to the name that had slipped from Kyousuke's mouth, Renko's eyelashes fluttered and she slowly opened her eyes. Exceedingly clear, almost transparent, her glacially blue eyes swam across the sky and seized on Kyousuke.

"……Heh-heh-heh." A breath of life spilled out. Her peach-colored lips traced a joyful curve as she opened her mouth to speak.

"How is it, Kyousuke? My bare face. I certainly hope that you like it!" Without the mask, her voice was beautifully clear, so lovely it made him shiver. "Heh…heh-heh! You know, I can't stop smiling. *The music won't stop*… I'm so happy I might go insane! Oh, I'm happy, Kyousuke. I had no idea that showing you my bare face would make me this happy… How nice, an introduction like this. It's welling up from my gut. What a thrill! This must be my murderous melody for you! Hee-hee-hee…!"

Her shoulders shook with laughter. Renko closed her eyes again and let her body sway

back and forth, moving as though carried along by some unheard melody.

Despite the fact that she had removed her headphones. Despite the fact that there was no music to be heard. Witnessing Renko's incomprehensible words and actions, Kyousuke began to sweat.

"…Huh? H-hey…what are you saying? I don't understand what you mean, Renko…"

Renko opened her eyes and smiled at the trembling boy. It was not a scornful smile; rather, she smiled like she was having all the fun in the world and simply couldn't help herself.

"Heh-heh…hmm? Ah, it's nothing major. To me, *my murderous impulses are music*. It's just that the music started to play. It's not audible to you, is it, Kyousuke…? Or maybe, this is your first time hearing this type of music? Death metal. Anyway, I'm playing it for you, so you don't have to worry about anything. I'll do everything for you, the death voice, shout, growl…to go along with the tune my bloodlust is playing, my hands and feet will play and dance for you! Ahem. And so, well—"

Linking her fingers together overhead, Renko leaned back in a tight stretch, emphasizing her abundant breasts and straining her tank top to the limit. When she had bent back as far as she could, she let her hands go and slouched forward.

Loosely dangling her two tattoo-covered arms, she opened her ice-blue eyes wide. At the center of two irises that reminded Kyousuke of the still surface of deep, deep water—her dark pupils contracted into tiny dots, like cats' eyes. From the upturned corners of her lips peeked strangely sharp canine teeth.

“We don’t need an MC, so let’s hurry up and start the show, Kyousukeeeeeee!!”

Her cry was ferocious and wild, like an untamed animal. Renko tossed her silver-white hair, kicked at the ground, and began to dance.

X X X

It was sheer dumb luck that Kyousuke avoided her first attack.

Kicking the ground, Renko’s body ricocheted off and sliced through the air, flying at him as she spun, a tornado of silver-white hair. These were not the movements of a human being, but the vicious motions of a savage beast.

Closing the fifteen-foot distance separating them to zero in an instant, she traced a wide arc with her right arm, swinging it down on him at point-blank range. Her power and speed were incredible.

“…Huh?!” Rolling to the side, Kyousuke avoided the blow by a hair’s breadth. A horrid, grinding *smash* erupted from the place he’d been standing less than a second before. The faint scent of shampoo mingled with the thick stench of iron rust, fragrant on the evening breeze.

“…Huh? How strange. You dodged it…don’t do that, Kyousuke. Heh-heh-heh…”

Wearing a broad smile, Renko sluggishly pulled her arms away from the iron fence, which had been *crushed and mangled and twisted* by her assault. She flicked fresh, wet blood from her wrists.

It wasn't Kyousuke's, but Renko's own blood. Her right palm looked to be bleeding.

"And yet, ooohh…this is too exciting, and I miscalculated my strength, didn't I?! I struck at you in this ecstatic trance and broke everything at once, including my hand. I'm designed to be a perfect killer. My bones are abnormally strong, and let me tell you, they don't break easily. Hee-hee…oh, well." Her body swaying with the murderous melody, Renko giggled. She didn't seem to feel even the slightest bit of pain.

Fallen on his backside on the ground a little ways away from her, Kyousuke looked up at Renko, dumbfounded. "Wh-what the…what the hell are you?! Y-you're not human!" On the edge of his vision, the iron fence stood twisted and broken. If he had taken the brunt of a blow like that, it would have been instant death—at best, a lethal wound.

Looking down at Kyousuke trembling with fear, Renko snaked her tongue across her blood-soaked arm; she shivered as she traced a sensual path over her intricate tattoos. "Why, how mean! …I am human. But I am not a product of nature. You're very perceptive to notice such a thing, Kyousuke. I'm getting more and more excited…eh-heh-heh. My murderous impulse is coming to a climax, so next up let me hear some good vocals, okay? I'll give it to you gently this time!"

The blood cleaned from her arm, Renko again raised her right hand, heedless of her injury. With an ecstatic expression, she gave her body over to the inaudible murderous melody.

Her silvery-white hair fluttered against a blazing sky, and her glacial eyes reflecting the fiery light were made of pure insanity, but she was so beautiful it was almost overwhelming.

That's why, perhaps—even facing imminent death—Kyousuke's mind was incredibly

tranquil. He didn't tremble in fear, nor was he stricken with despair, but watched her with an absolute fascination. He was utterly consumed.

With slightly flushed cheeks, Renko smiled, baring her canine teeth. "Well, then, Kyousuke, will you be killed now? I won't miss this time…I definitely won't miss."

"…"

Kyousuke couldn't move.

Even though he knew he was going to die, his body wouldn't move.

Rolling her wrist around and folding in her fingers one by one, Renko slowly made a fist. He could almost hear the chain-like tattoos that entwined around her arms clang together as she prepared to strike.

"Kyousuke!"

"Oh no, Kyousuke!"

Two strained voices cut through the twilight, echoing in the small space. In front of the open metal door stood Eiri and Maina.

"Oohh, come on! What's this?! This jarring noise interrupting my performance—" Lowering her fist in annoyance, Renko turned to look. As soon as she recognized the two figures, delight quickly spread across her face, her narrowed eyes opening wide as she smiled again. "…Ah, what's this? If it isn't Eiri and Maina. Hi there, you two! You came at just the right time. Everyone knows a show is nothing without an audience, yep!"

"Um…could it be, Renko? …Are you Renko?" Looking back and forth between the gas

mask on the ground and the beautiful girl with silver hair, Eiri's voice was heavy with amazement.

Maina stared fixedly at Renko's bare face, mouth ajar.

Perhaps because she was pleased by their reactions, Renko let out a good-humored laugh. "Heh-heh, that's right, I'm Renko Hikawa! At last you understand what I meant when I said I was a beautiful girl, don't you? I'm happy…so very happy! Only right now, I'm kind of in the middle of something. I'll kill you very thoroughly after I'm done here, so for now won't you please watch from there?" Dismissively, she turned back to Kyousuke.

"Huh?!" Eiri raised her voice. "In the middle of something, what do you…? What are you doing to Kyousuke?" She took a step forward, irritation apparent in her rust-colored eyes. Her piercing gaze was locked on Renko's right arm, dripping blood. "You're going to kill us…is that what you said? What the hell do you mean by that? Are you joking?" Stepping over the discarded gas mask, she edged closer to Renko. Though she looked angry, it didn't seem that Eiri had realized that anything was amiss about Renko's state.

"Wait…stupid! Stay back! Run, quickl—"

"—Shut up."

Renko cut off Kyousuke's warning with a growl. It was a deep, heavy sound like a bass drum thundering up from the pit of her stomach, a sound born of intense rage and hate.

Turning her attention from Kyousuke, she faced Eiri. In the last view that he had of Renko's face, he could see that it was completely expressionless, the smile that she had

worn until just a moment ago having completely splintered.

"…Ah, my goodness, what are you doing, Eiri? Well, if my first murderous impulse hasn't been painted over by this new murderous impulse…the tune that was playing has been superseded by a new tune! I was really enjoying that one, though. The discord…the disharmony of stopping one song in the middle and forcing a new one is really—just the worst! Could it be, I'm irritated by playing this explosive sound? These violent riffs and blast beats…hmm. This murderous melody…I'm already tired of hearing it! If I can't stop it soon…soon…!"

Bobbing her head up and down, and rocking her body back and forth, Renko took a few steps toward Eiri. From her fingertips, blood fell in languid droplets, pattering on the ground and leaving a thin crimson trail behind her.

"…Huh? Wh-what are you…? You're not making any sense!" Though she was clearly unsettled by Renko's strange demeanor, Eiri did not give ground. Her severe eyes shining coldly, she moved to protect Maina, who was weeping in fear beside the door. "Some crap about murderous impulses and melodies…what are you going on about…?!"

Eiri abruptly grew quiet. Reflected in her wide-open eyes was what lay behind Renko—the twisted and broken iron fence. Following the trail of blood from the contorted wreckage to Renko's dripping right hand, Eiri's sullen face, for the first time, showed shades of fear. "You…that arm…no way…it can't be? That means, the iron fence…my god…" Her voice shaking, she stepped back.

Holding her advance, Renko crouched ever so slightly. "You think it can't be true, Eiri? Well, in that case…" That instant, Renko pushed off the ground, already running and closed

the space between them in a burst of speed. “Why don’t you test that theory with your own fleeeeeeeshhh?!”

“……?!”

She threw out a quick strike with her left arm. However, the blow, aimed to remove Eiri’s head, cut through empty air. With lightning reflexes, Eiri had ducked under the attack.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho! What’s this? You avoided it? Oh *my*!” Pitching forward enthusiastically, Renko whirled round and round like a spinning top before regaining her balance. Bringing her index finger to her lower lip, she blinked in surprise.

“…Don’t move.”

From behind, scarlet fingernails pressed into the base of Renko’s throat. The Suzaku fingernails—Eiri’s chosen weapon as an assassin.

“…If you move, I’ll slit your throat. It doesn’t matter what kind of a monster you are, you can still bleed out, right? …Hmph. You were careless. How sad for you.”

Renko smiled broadly, her ice-blue eyes open wide. “…Hee-hee. Yeah, you’re right… it’s just too bad. Oh, of course, I mean *too bad for you*!” She grabbed Eiri’s wrist, tearing the deadly hand away in one fluid motion.

“…Wha—?!” Eiri had no time to react to Renko’s unanticipated maneuver.

“Gaah!!” Renko drove her elbow into Eiri’s solar plexus with a sharp *whump*.

Eiri’s slender body jumped with a twitch, and then she collapsed on the spot.

“Eiri!” “Eiri, noooooo!!” Kyousuke and Maina’s dual shrieks rang out at the same time.

Her breath had been knocked out by the attack. It was too painful to look at, seeing Eiri, who usually behaved so nonchalantly, in anguish, her face tear streaked and twitching.

Holding her gut, down on all fours, she gasped for oxygen.

Renko stood over her, puffing out her cheeks as if scandalized by the intrusion. She spoke as though she were scolding a small child. “Don’t you see it’s useless? To threaten even though you’re not ready to kill. You placed your blades a centimeter to the side of the carotid artery! I think it’s sweet that you don’t want to hurt me, but…oh, what’s this? The melody has changed! My feelings of friendship for Eiri seem to have overcome my rage. Heh-heh…! Eiri really is great, isn’t she? She’s so kind and pretty! I love her in a different way from how I feel about Kyousuke. That’s why—” Joy spread across Renko’s face, as she lifted one stocking-clad leg. “*I want to liven things up on this stage!* Eh-heh-heh…okay now, *sing!*”

She kicked upward, smashing the point of her foot into Eiri's stomach.

"Gugh!!"

Eiri let out a hoarse gasp and rolled over, convulsing on the concrete. Lying on her back, she gasped for breath like a fish washed ashore, as a white indoor slipper pressed down on her gut.

"Oh yes, that's good…so good! You've got a lovely scream, Eiri…," Renko murmured ecstatically. Placing a hand atop her knee, she pinned Eiri's body to the ground, enjoying the pain and fear that racked the other girl's face.

"But isn't it still a little bit too pretty? …Okay, let's see if we can get you to sing with a bit more grit next! Give us a growl, now really *scream*! It's also called a grunt in some circles, but…what's that? You haven't heard of it? Well, then, let me teach you now! Okay, cry for me!"

Smiling ferociously, her canine teeth shining, she placed her foot over Eiri's solar plexus and, without pause, set her full body weight on it.

*Crack! Crunch! Pop!* The sound of breaking bone was audible.

"Gah…AAAAAAHHHHHHGGGHHH!!"

Eiri's song made them want to plug up their ears.

With tears in her wide eyes and bloody vomit leaking from her mouth, all of Eiri's familiar strength and composure had vanished. This was the true Eiri, the one that Kyousuke had seen in the infirmary—her delicate face exposed, destroyed by a storm of pain and fear and disgrace, utterly beaten.

Vestiges of Ayaka merged with Eiri in Kyousuke's mind.

"……Fuck you."

Ayaka who had been viciously bullied by her classmates. When he'd discovered his usually bright and cheerful sister sobbing alone in her room at night, Kyousuke had resolved to become stronger than anyone else.

To protect Ayaka's smiling face, and to keep the people who were important to him from being made to ever feel that way again, he had resolved to become strong. But despite all that…

"Fuck you, you piece of shit…what the hell are you trembling for, Kyousuke Kamiya?" *Didn't you train and forge your fists for just this kind of situation?!* In that moment, the feelings that had bound him like an iron chain fell away, evaporating in a burst of angry flame. Fear, horror, confusion, hesitation—the furious passion that burned through all of them at once was directed both at Renko and at himself. His rage and vexation blazed like hellfire, and he could move again.

"…Aah, it's no good. Worked up like this, there's no way I can go easy," Kyousuke muttered, standing. He clenched his fists tight enough to break them and moved forward without hesitation.

"Eeeeeek!! Eiri's—Eiri is—aaahh!! Waaahhh!" Maina continued to scream and shake, running left and right, back and forth, near the doorway in a panic.

Noticing Kyousuke's approach, Renko tilted her head quizzically. "What is it, Kyousuke? I'm sorry, but right now I'm playing Eiri's song… I'll spend plenty of time with you after this, so don't get impatient. I'd be happy if you could please just wait a little while longer, while we listen to Eiri's death agonies, okay? If you can do that for me, I'll play you

passionately! Eh-heh-heh."

"……Renko."

He placed his hands on her bare shoulders and called her name. Her clear, ice-blue eyes blinked rapidly in confusion.

"What is it, Kyousuke? You look so serious, but…oh! Could it be, you want a threeso—"

"—Shut the hell up."

He drove his right fist directly into the center of her grinning face.

"Bwuh?!"

The unforgiving blow sent Renko flying through the air in a tailspin, impacting the concrete with a thunderous crash. She rolled along the ground—only to smash into the iron fence on the other side of the rooftop—and stopped moving.

"Waaahhh…uh?" Maina's wail abruptly halted, and silence fell over the group.

Reclining on the remains of the iron fence, her head drooping, Renko's facial expression was hidden.

"…Did I do it? I did…at least, it looks that way." Uncurling his numb fist, Kyousuke exhaled. His hand felt like he had punched a steel girder. She may have looked like just a girl, but his opponent had something monstrous about her. He hadn't been able to go easy.

He hoped that the fact that she hadn't gotten up yet meant that his punch had been effective. Muttering a single word of apology to Renko under his breath, Kyousuke crouched down next to Eiri.

"Hey. Are you okay, Eiri? …Shit, she went too far, and now it looks like Eiri's passing on to the other side…"

"Huh?! I'm not…not going anywhere! What are you saying, all of a sudde— Oof!!"

"Idiot, don't push yourself! You've probably got a few broken ribs, at least… Can you stand?"

"Ugh… D-don't talk like that! …Why don't you go on to the other side yourself?"

Turning her face away from Kyousuke, Eiri cursed at him, but even so, she obediently leaned on his shoulder, seeming absolutely exhausted.

"Eiriiiiiiiii!! A-are you o-o-o-okaaaaaayyy?!" A little late, Maina came running over. Watching Eiri stand with Kyousuke's help, she toned her crying down a bit.

"…I'm fine. It's nothing major," Eiri reassured the flustered girl in her usual nonchalant tone. "An injury like this is of no concern at all, okay?"

"What?! But, but! Eiri, you're still cryi—"

"Huh?! I'm n-not crying!!"

*...You're not? Somehow, she's trying to stay composed in the face of pain from her injuries.*

"You are crying after all…don't put on such a brave face!" Maina scolded. Eiri flushed deep red all the way out to her ears.

"…Um, sorry to ask you, Maina," Kyousuke interrupted. "But right now, would you please help Eiri to the infirmary?"

"Hmm…? I don't mind, but…um, what about you, Kyousuke…?" Maina inquired as she cautiously took support of Eiri's body weight.

"Me?" Kyousuke began to answer, "I'm—"

"…Heh… Heh-heh… Heh-ha… Ha… Haaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Strange laughter filled the air.

Maina was startled. "Eee?!"

Eiri flinched. "…Ugh."

When they looked, Renko was still lying facedown against the iron fence, and her shoulders were shaking.

"Aww, really…give me a break, Kyousukeee! What are you doing, punching a young lady like that? …He-heh. It's terrible, truly terrible! If something happens to my face, my murderous impulse just grows that much louder…! This is the first time it has produced this kind of explosive sound, you know. It's shocking! I'm totally stupefied! With happiness! What joy! Hmm? Is it strange to be happy because you've been punched? It is strange! It's masochistic! Extremely masochistic! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Renko, who seemed to have completely recovered, laughed loudly into the sky. Her nightmarishly beautiful white face didn't have a single scratch on it. Even a direct hit, at close range and with Kyousuke's full strength, had failed to leave a mark.

"Wait a second…no way. Is her body made of some kind of superalloy?"

"Kyou—kyoukyoukyoukyou— Kyousuke! Sh-should w-we wun…run away?!" Maina pulled on his shirttail with one hand, her teeth chattering audibly.

Eiri's voice was also shaky. "Kyousuke…," she said, turning pale.

"…I'm leaving Eiri to you, Maina!" Kyousuke said. "I'm her opponent now." He pulled Maina's fingers away from him, smoothed Eiri's hair, and turned to face Renko, moving as if to protect the two of them.

"Huh?!" Eiri glared. "Don't be an idiot…do you want to die?! What can you possibly do alone?"

"Sh-she's wight!" Maina added. "Even you, Kyousuke, against Renko…like this…"

"…It's fine. It might not be possible to take her down, but I won't give up that easily. I have confidence in my persistence. That's why I'm entrusting Eiri to you now, Maina… I'm counting on you! Go and call for help as soon as you can. I'll stall for time, so go…I'll be fine." He smiled brashly.

"Kyousuke…" Maina's eyes were wet with fresh tears.

*If no one holds Renko back, everyone will die.* It could be five or ten minutes before help came or maybe even longer. Either way, he had no choice but to hold out; right here, right now, there was no one else who could.

"Hey now, just a minute, Kyousukeee!" Renko whined, springing to her feet. "You're paying all your attention to those two… Why don't you talk to me a little more? Talk to me, and play with me, and flirt with me…let me hear all of your different voices! I'll let you hear all of mine, too. Let's come together to play music! Let's play some sweet, violent screamo…! Heh-heh-heh!" Her ice-blue eyes flashed with cruel ecstasy as she jumped up.

"Okay, fine…," Kyousuke answered. "Since I have no choice, I'll accompany you, Renko."

Amid the heightening tension, Maina had finally managed to support Eiri, and the two of

them shambled toward the door. *Seems like she got the picture.* In his heart, Kyousuke silently thanked Maina.

"Kyousuke," Eiri called out in a gentle voice as they were leaving. He did not turn to look. "…If you die, I'm gonna kill you, okay?"

He smiled broadly at Eiri's harsh and affectionate words. "…Idiot. You can't kill a dead man, and you couldn't even kill living people, anyway…," he answered, but the two of them had already disappeared from the rooftop. "Well, then… Sorry to keep you waiting, Renko."

Kyousuke stiffened, his expression grim. The fear circuits in his mind had long since burned out, and survival instinct heightened every one of his senses to the utmost limit.

"…Hmm. I finally have your attention again, eh? Really, you're so popular…I'm getting jealous! —Ah-ha, I understand a little bit of what those other girls must have been feeling. I see…so this is the melody of jealousy. Wow…it's greeaat! So great! The murderous impulse that you pull out of me is a complex melody, transforming the tones with infinite variety…I never get even a little bit tired of listening to it! I want to listen to it even more and play it even more! Playing, and playing, and playing, and playing the best I can… I want to savor the grandest finale! That's why, Kyousukeee…"

Beneath the blazing sky, her silvery-white hair fluttering, Renko gave herself over to the melody that only she could hear and began to dance. "The two of us…let's kill each other, as true lovers, shall weeeeeeeeeeee?!"

Renko bellowed from the pit of her stomach and kicked at the ground. Her cobalt eyes shone with murderous desire as she ran straight at him.

Starting to well up from deep inside his head—from somewhere, Kyousuke thought he

could hear some unfamiliar music.

x x x

"I like you like you like you love you, Kyousuke! Ah-hah!" Renko babbled cheerfully as —*boom!*—a powerful left-hand blow crashed over Kyousuke, who immediately countered with a left-handed uppercut to his attacker's lower jaw.

"Oh, reeeaally?!" Renko taunted, effortlessly twisting out of the way. "Thanks…for that!!"

Without a moment's delay, Kyousuke followed up his first attack, throwing his right fist, which he had held in reserve, toward the bridge of Renko's nose, only to watch her again twist into a dodge, contorting her body until she was nearly horizontal with the ground.

"Wha…?!" Surprised by her unexpected movements, Kyousuke's punch caught only silver hair.

"Gotcha!" Renko cried. Quickly grabbing Kyousuke's outstretched arm with both hands, she used the captured arm like a gymnastics bar, kicking off the ground into a back hip circle trick. She landed straddling Kyousuke's shoulders, her soft thighs fixing his head in place on both sides.

"Hang on!! Wh-what's with that move—?"

"—Should I snap your neck? Of course! You're dead now, Kyousuke! Heh-heh-heh." Holding his head in both arms, Renko wrenched her hips in the opposite direction. In reality, she only pretended to twist, but if she had done it for real, his neck likely would have

snapped. Renko bent to whisper in Kyousuke's trembling ear. "If I just wanted to kill you, it would be so easy… But that would be boring! And I really do like you, after all. I want to feel it more and more… I want you to feel it more and more, my love for you! Eh-heh-heh!"

Laughing, Renko took Kyousuke's head in a *stranglehold embrace*. Wrapping both arms around him, she squeezed his head between her knees, one over and one under. He could feel her abundant breasts on the back of his head. His skull, enveloped by Renko's softness and sweet scent, made a terrible creaking sound as she squeezed, gradually adding strength to her hold.

"Is this what you call love, you…urg-aaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!" Any lecherous thoughts that may have crossed his mind were blown away by literally head-splitting pain. Then, it occurred to him that his skull was being smashed like a watermelon by Renko's watermelon-sized breasts.

"…Uh-oh, better watch out. I loved you too much and nearly crushed you just now." Recovering her senses for a moment, Renko loosened her powerful grip. The tension in his body relaxed, and Kyousuke crumpled on the spot. Having alighted from his shoulders to stand behind him, Renko wrapped her arms under his armpits, holding him up. "That was, however, an awfully nice voice…," she murmured, nibbling at his ear. "I do want you to let me hear more of it, hmm?"

She stuck her warm, slim fingers up under the hem of Kyousuke's shirt and ran them gently across his bare skin. He felt goose bumps rise at the exquisite way she moved her hands using just the right amount of pressure.

"Hey, where would you like me to start destroying you? Your stomach? Your sides? Your

chest? Or maybe…down here? Heh-heh! Digestive organs, respiratory organs, circulatory organs, reproductive organs… Heh-heh-heh. If you have a request, let me hear it, Kyousuke! You're special to me, you know. So, I'm going to let you die in just the way you wish!"

"…Why?"

"Hmm?"

"Why me, Renko?!" Kyousuke screamed, shoving her away with all his strength.

"Waahh?!" she yelled out theatrically, tumbling to the ground. "Owwie… Don't be so cruel!"

Fed up with her mock whining, Kyousuke, head still throbbing in pain, raised his voice. "As if you know anything about pain, Renko?! I'm not the Warehouse Butcher or anything else.

"I might be stronger than most people, but besides that, I'm totally normal! Not special at all! There's no rhyme, reason, or rationalization for someone like me to be liked by someone like you. So, knowing all that, why are you—?"

"…Hmm, why is it, I wonder…? Heh-heh." Lying faceup, Renko's eyes were closed as if in sleep. She was utterly defenseless, and yet Kyousuke could not seem to muster the will to raise a hand against her. Trying to control his ragged breathing, he quietly stared at Renko's serene face. A gentle smile, so sweet that one could never imagine her a murderer, slowly spread across her inhuman visage.

"I'm a made-to-order Murder Maid… You see, I was created to kill. Death has always been my raison d'être. From the moment I was born, the murderous melody has been reverberating through me. So I killed. I killed, and I killed, and I killed. I requested kills,

and kills were requested of me… I killed one right after another. Men and women, old and young, white and black and yellow… It was all the same to me. Like a pair of scissors doesn't choose the paper it cuts, the one doing the choosing was always my master. The master of the tool that is me—*that master is my murderous impulse*. The murderous melody commands, and as it sings out to me, I slaughter. Blending and harmonizing with every emotion…the music spurs my every action toward 'killing.' I can't stop…I can't stooooooop!!"

Eyes suddenly wide, Renko leaped to her feet.

"……?!"

She had given absolutely no forewarning. Kyousuke, frozen in place, could not avoid Renko's strike. He only barely, and at the last second, managed to throw his right arm in the path of the blow aimed dead at his temple. His bones screamed with the impact.

"Ugh!!"

Immediately, her right arm lashed out toward Kyousuke, who was still reeling from the first attack. Riding the momentum of her strike, she unleashed a backward roundhouse kick. The heel of her foot, shod in a school slipper, struck his side with frightening accuracy.

"Gah!!" Kyousuke let out a pained shout. Hit with his defenses down, he tumbled, landing on hard concrete. The world reeled, dull gray floor and fire-red sky both spinning, end over end.

"Shit…that hurts…dammit. She's so fast!" Trying to protect his injured side, Kyousuke pushed himself up, gritting his teeth against the pain.

Renko sauntered forward, swinging her hips back and forth as she closed the distance

between them. “Oh, I’m sorry! Music is ruled by rhythm, just like the melody of my murderous impulse. And when it gets into a good hook or finally reaches a climax, I just can’t control myself, you see! Tee-hee…”

Sticking out her tongue, Renko tapped the side of her own head with a *konk*. As Kyousuke watched her innocent behavior, he recalled the words he had heard just a moment ago. He finally understood.

*I like you, so I want to hold your hand.*

*I like you, so I want to hold you tight.*

*I like you, so I want to kiss you.*

Those were normal thoughts, normal feelings. To Renko’s twisted mind, it followed that *I like you, so I want to kill you*. With her gas mask removed, Renko’s every emotion was tied to murder.

It was insane, but Renko, as she was now, could not and would not choose any option but to kill. *That’s how she was made.* She was fundamentally different from Kyousuke and the others.

“Heh-heh. Really… Why did I have to meet you with that mask on? When the murderous melody that is my master is missing, I don’t kill people, and I don’t even think about killing people. It’s the same way that scissors don’t cut anything when they’re not being used. But Kyousuke, I’m still more or less human. Even without my murderous desires, I do have feelings. That’s why I came to care about you… Normally, I don’t get the chance to feel anything for someone before my killer instincts kick in, you see. Very rarely do my emotions develop this far. And more than anything…”

Narrowing her ice-blue eyes, Renko stared hard at Kyousuke. Her pupils were fully dilated. From the depths of her glittering insanity, a faint spark of affection flickered.

"…To me, you are special. I know you don't think so, Kyousuke, but it's true! To a creature like me, who has lived in the shadows of the world since the day it was born… well, you understand. You're the first good person I've gotten to know while wearing the mask. And the only person who has never killed… That's why I'm so interested in you, Kyousuke! Because you're so totally different from me! To find out what makes a person like you *you*—see?"

"……"

Kyousuke recalled the words that Eiri had spoken in the infirmary. "The worlds that you and I inhabit are too different." The one person out of place in an academy full of murderers that trafficked freely with the underworld—that was Kyousuke. Even though Eiri and Maina were also outliers of sorts, they were not completely alien to this place.

That was probably why Renko was so captivated by him. She was different from the other students, who were only attracted to the mask of the Warehouse Butcher that he had been forced to wear. Only Renko was attracted to Kyousuke's real face and got closer to him.

She continued her leisurely approach. "When I spoke to you, I was so surprised. You seemed so vulnerable! I couldn't sense even a little bit of hostility or malice or bloodlust or anything. You were so different from anyone I'd even known before… That difference felt good. Emotions I'd never known before came rushing to the surface, one after the other… And the moment they connected with something besides killing was so nice, Kyousuke. It

was so much fun!"

She smiled, kneeling by his side, and slowly stroked his cheek with a gentle, careful touch. Her pale cobalt eyes shone with emotion.

Kyousuke was completely bewildered. He had no idea what to do. *How should I even feel about Renko? I don't know.* Reflecting back on the past several days and the time he'd spent with her, Kyousuke spoke up.

"It was fun for me, too, Renko… Being with you was really fun. But…if we're talking about vulnerability, you're the one who's practically defenseless. When I was surrounded by nothing but deviants, I took a lot of comfort in the thought that someone so innocent as you could exist here… That's what I thought, anyway, but—"

"Right, but that wasn't my true face, was it? I understand, and I understood it then, too. As I became attracted to you, I wanted to try all kinds of things for the first time. I wanted to touch and be touched, I wanted to know you and for you to know me. Not the person wearing the mask, no— I wanted you to know the true me! Heh-heh…how touching! It's heartrending, Kyousuke… The moment I cast off my mask, exposing my true self—well, how do you like it?"

Eyes upturned, Renko slid her finger across his skin, arriving at his throat. With both hands she squeezed, lifting him off his feet.

"Ah…ug…Ren…ko…?!"

His throat was being crushed. He couldn't breathe. Her thumbs pressed on his trachea; an index finger on his carotid artery; a middle finger on his jugular vein; the rest holding him in place— It was an expert stranglehold.

Renko's icy eyes sparkled fiercely, her bloodlust swirling up around them as if to swallow them both up. "I want to touch. I want to be touched. I want to know you. I want to be known by you… All of those feelings *have vanished once and for all*! I only want to kill. Kyousuke, I want to kill you! You who I love above all others, I want to kill you more than anyone else! That alone is the finale I truly desire. Because, you see, this is the real me… I'm sorry, Kyousuke, I really am. I know there was still so much you wanted to do together…but right now the only thing I want to do is kill you! Now that you've seen my true face, won't you die for me? Heh-heh-heh-heh…"

Her body swaying slowly back and forth, Renko tightened her grip. *If it goes on like this, I'll really die.* He tried frantically to tear her away, but her arms did not yield. Every bit of air was squeezed from his lungs, his mind dyed bright red by the dammed-up blood. "Gah…hah…shi, shit…ah…" His vision filled with static.

Renko's face, wearing an ecstatic smile, faded away in the haze. On the verge of death, a different image drifted into Kyousuke's consciousness, the figure of his beloved younger sister—Ayaka. *Is she smiling or crying?* He could not read her expression. Either way, there was something he had to tell her.

*Before I pass out.*

*Before my life is cut short.*

*Long ago, I swore to protect you no matter what.*

*I swore to never make you sad.*

*I swore to make you smile.*

*To you, the most important girl in the world.*

*Even if it doesn't reach you, there's something I have to say—*

"Sorry… I'm so sorry…*Ayaka*…"

As Kyousuke mumbled his final words, he suddenly felt Renko's grip slacken. "…… Ah?"

He let out a stupefied gasp, feeling as though the world had been melting away. Then suddenly the fog clouding his vision cleared all at once. Slipping from Renko's hands, he collapsed onto hard concrete. Coughing convulsively on all fours, Kyousuke greedily gasped for air.

"……Huh? Wha—? Whaaat?" Renko's dazed voice came from somewhere above him. When he looked, still catching his breath, he saw her standing stock-still, her ice-blue eyes wide. *She looks like she doesn't know what happened.* Fear written on her face, Renko shrunk into an unsteady retreat.

From her twitching lips, unbelievable words came spilling out.

"The music……*the murderous melody stopped*."

X X X

"……Huh?" Kyousuke wasn't sure he understood. The thing that drove Renko to kill, the

absolute murderous impulse—the music… *That music that's been playing in her head this whole time suddenly stopped…is that what she said?*

"Why?! How?! It's wrong! My murderous melody can't just cut out when I'm halfway through like this, that's impossible! What did you…what did you do, Kyousukeeeeee?!"

Renko howled in frustration, surprised and upset by a situation she could not accept.

She leaned over the weakened Kyousuke and grabbed him by his collar. Her eyes, clear and blue as the surface of a lake, wavered slightly. The brilliance of her radiant bloodlust had vanished.

Of course, Kyousuke hadn't actually done anything. Nothing in their surroundings seemed to have changed, either. *Then, why?* He was frozen, unable to answer, when, burying her face in Kyousuke's chest, Renko wailed.

"We were so close, and then you said someone's name, and then…it happened *when you called out that other girl's name*! My murderous melody stopped playing! My chest felt heavy, my mind went blank, and everything went all to hell…! Aaaaaahhh, dammit!" Renko fixed Kyousuke in an angry glare, biting her lip as though in a pout, her cheeks flushed.

"Tell me, Kyousuke…who the hell was Ayaka?! That's a girl's name, isn't it? Is she that important to you? Answer me!! Why didn't you call *my* name just before you died?! Weren't you thinking about me?! I feel so strongly about you, but you just… Why…? Why did my murderous melody stop…?!"

Renko's shoulders trembled. Low sobs escaped her throat. Renko—whose every emotion was supposedly tied to the act of killing—*was crying*. Kyousuke was baffled. "Renko, you…about Ayaka…are you j-jealous of her?" he asked, perplexed.

"…Jealous?" Renko asked, lifting her face to look at him again. She swiped at her tears with a tattoo-covered arm, glacial eyes narrowing. Ah yes, that's it…I'm jealous! I'm feeling extreme jealousy toward this Ayaka girl! How could I not?! A girl who means so much to you, even more than me, the one who loves you most out of everything in this world — If I could, I'd like to mutilate her right now… I want to butcher her! Ah yes…it's starting to play again…the maddening, violent murderous melody! The music! It's singing as loud as cicadas in May—it's saying kill kill kill

about some other girl… I'm heartbroken. It feels like my chest is about to split open…and all my different emotions will spill out in a disarray…and then—then the murderous melody that ties them all together will come screeching to a halt!"

As she spoke, Renko grasped at her chest as though in agony. Biting her lip and frowning, she turned her blue eyes up at him, looking utterly miserable.

Seeing Renko in such a pitiful state, Kyousuke gradually recovered his composure. It seemed that the idea that he could fall in love with another member of the opposite sex (in truth, Ayaka was his little sister, and he didn't hold any romantic feelings toward her, but still)—the idea of that seemed to fill Renko with unbearable resentment and sadness.

She wondered why he hadn't been thinking about her.

She had been thinking so intensely about him, so why…

*Why wasn't he thinking of her in return?*

"Could it be—?"

It all clicked into place. Irritation and sadness, like a hard pressure on your chest… negative emotions like jealousy… Kyousuke remembered feeling them himself, these sweet and bitter emotions— "Renko." He called her name.

Renko turned her face up. "…Hmm?"

Placing his hands on her shoulders, he gazed into her upturned eyes. "Ayaka is a very important girl. She's the most important girl in the world to me, and she's waiting for me on the outside. So, I'm sorry Renko, but I can't return your feelings. You are not my number one.

I'm so happy that you feel that way about me, but, well…that's why…I'm sorry."

"__"

Listening to Kyousuke's words, Renko's facial expression became blank, and she was silent. "The most important girl…sorry?" She suddenly screwed up her face.

"Ww…aaa…waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" she wailed loudly, clinging to Kyousuke's chest, and gave herself over to sobbing, warm tears soaking the front of his shirt. "Waaahh…Kyousuke…rejected me…*sniffle*…*hic*."

Kyousuke stroked the sobbing girl's hair. "You like me, don't you? And this is your first time falling in love, isn't it? The thing is, Renko… Love isn't something that always goes smoothly—more than anything, it's hard. Why do you think that is? The feelings you have when you come to love someone, well…*they aren't something you can satisfy on your own*. It's different from simple annoyance or sadness. Throwing your one-sided feelings out there, or one-sidedly butchering another person…there's no way you can be satisfied doing that. As long as that other person doesn't also hold the same feelings…as long as it's not mutual love, you won't be satisfied."

The force that had halted Renko's bloodlust wasn't jealousy, it was the bitterness of unrequited love. The moment when Kyousuke had called out Ayaka's name—and the next moment, when she had realized clearly that the person she liked was not thinking about her—a torrent of violent dissonance had overwhelmed Renko.

Jealousy, annoyance, resentment, heartache…and then sweetness. Those emotions, gushing out one after the other, jumbling together in a chaos of feeling—that was what must have stopped Renko's murderous melody. An intolerable discord that wore away at her heart…

"……Hmm?" Renko slowly withdrew her face from his shirt. At the corner of the slight curve of her lips peeked out a bright white canine tooth. "…That's right, it's unrequited love, hmm…yeah. It certainly doesn't feel good. It feels really bad. But Kyousuke…isn't there also a saying? Hatred is the flip side of love. If you won't return my love, then the anger I'm feeling now—this hatred—I'll surrender myself to it…!"

Opening her ice-blue eyes wide, Renko wrapped her arms around him in a tight embrace.

“There’s no way I can do that! My love for you is sooo much greater than any hate I feel. Ohh…I want to kill you…I want to kill you so badly! But you don’t think of me that way… waah. What should I do…what should I do?! Ohhhh!”

Afraid of what Renko might do, Kyousuke wiped the sweat from his forehead and smiled ruefully. “Geez, you…you say such nice things to me…thank you, Renko.” *I’m reconsidering her. Turns out Renko is a nice girl after all.*

Sure, her overwhelming bloodlust might pose a problem, but that was in her nature—it wasn’t her true personality. Without the bloodlust, Renko was a pure, kind girl…just like when she wore the gas mask.

If she wasn’t, then Kyousuke would surely be dead by now. It was precisely because she was earnest and sincere about her feelings that Renko’s murderous melody had stopped. Kyousuke could live with her like this…

“Murder Maid…what the hell are you doing?”

In the fiery twilight, a threatening, girlish voice rang out.

Renko, who had been pressing her face into Kyousuke’s chest and rubbing it back and forth, suddenly stopped. From the direction of the doorway, a petite figure slowly stepped toward them, dragging something heavy in each hand. *Clank, clank, clank…*

“……Ms. Kurumiya…”

“Hmph. I never thought you would still be alive, Kamiya. You’ve been fawned over by the Murder Maid with her safety device removed, and yet here you are in perfectly good

health… And? What the hell are you doing, Renko? Are you up here flirting? You who can do nothing but kill? Why the hell is that?!" Kurumiya shook the iron pipe gripped in her right hand.

Lifting her face from Kyousuke's chest, Renko watched Kurumiya approach. Like a young child being scolded, she puffed out her cheeks in a pout. "Well, wasn't it inevitable? It's because Kyousuke doesn't love me! If Kyousuke would just say, 'I love you,' then I could kill him quite happily, but…"

Hearing Renko's words, Kurumiya opened her marble-like eyes wide.

She narrowed her eyes. "…Oh?" The iron pipe turned toward Kyousuke. "Well, then, hurry up and tell Renko, 'I love you,' Kamiya. If you don't, I'll have to—"

"Stoooooop! I'm the one who's going to kill Kyousuke. I absolutely, unconditionally, will not let you kill him! And if you force him to say that against his will, I won't be satisfied… because my murderous melody won't play!" Renko, who had stood up in great haste, protected Kyousuke with her outstretched arms.

"…Whaaat?" A deep furrow appeared on Kurumiya's forehead. Looking back and forth between Renko and Kyousuke suspiciously, she lowered the iron pipe. "Your murderous melody won't play? What are you talking about? Are you broken…Murder Maid?"

"Heh-heh. Probably. But…Kurumiyaaa…" Renko's body began slowly swaying from side to side. Bobbing her head to the inaudible rhythm, she slowly lowered her stance. "For anyone other than Kyousuke, the melody plays just fine, you know… Seeeeee?!"

Renko kicked off the ground in a burst of motion, leaping toward Kurumiya with astounding speed. She covered the ten-foot distance in less than a second. So fast it was

almost impossible to see, her left arm smashed down—nearly crushing Kurumiya's head.

"Urgk!!" With speed surpassing even Renko's strike, the iron pipe interrupted her attack, crashing into her side. Renko's head struck the iron fence with a *clang!* as she was thrown away, and she stayed there, not moving.

It looked like she had actually fainted. Leaning her head against the fence, she appeared to have lost consciousness, blood leaking from the place the pipe had struck.

"…Hmm, interesting. You don't seem to be defective. Your movements haven't dulled… on the contrary, you're in great shape, aren't you? You really tried there for a second! …You really are a monstrous thing, Murder Maid. Snatching away my composure, even if it was for just a single millisecond…hee-hee-he!"

*...Without a doubt, Kurumiya is the monstrous one.* She'd reacted so fast to counter a surprise attack, and she'd taken Renko down with just a single blow, and now she wasn't even bothering to acknowledge either of those things— "Really, what kind of person are you…are all of the teachers here monsters like you?"

Watching Kyousuke tremble, Kurumiya shouldered her deadly weapons. Crossing the two pipes behind her head, she grinned widely. "I'm a professional killer, Kamiya. *As are all of the other teachers*. Not third-rate junk like Rusty Nail, but top-tier professionals. I mean, obviously the teachers at a school for training killers would be murderers themselves, right? Among other things, I am called 'Bellows Maria'…I'm quite famous. Your strength may be impressive, but I could waste an inexperienced pup like you in two seconds flat."

"…Are you serious?"

Kyousuke had thought his situation was serious before, but now… He silently vowed to

never meet any of the teachers at this school in battle—that included Kurumiya.

Even just imagining a lineup of others like her was scary…

"Well, enough of that, Kamiya…what the hell kind of witchcraft did you use, you bastard? I sent Murder Maid with explicit instructions to kill you, and she not only *couldn't* kill her target, but *wouldn't* do it! This is the first time we've encountered this kind of error. Honestly, I'm surprised."

Her smile vanished, and she looked down on Kyousuke. In her sweet-looking eyes swirled a mysterious darkness. It contained surprise and fear—or possibly something like jealousy—all negative emotions.

"She wanted to show you her honest face, and you also seemed to want to see it… Since I'm so kind, I went out of my way to unfasten the safety device, but…this was not the outcome I was expecting. Stopping Murder Maid is something even I can do. However, calming her bloodlust is impossible, and yet you somehow managed to do just that… Why were *you* able to? What the hell kind of witchcraft did you use?"

Of course, Kurumiya had been the one to set Renko after him. Knowing that Kyousuke was innocent, she had gone out of her way to torment him, illegally putting lethal weapons in the hands of other students…removing Renko's "safety limiter"… *What kind of grudge does she have against me that she has to go that far?* Kyousuke resisted the urge to question her about it. "Well, I don't really know myself, but…the magic of love, perhaps?"

"Who said you could get wise? Are you making fun of me? I'll smash you up!"

"Umm…" ...*Could it be that she just enjoys bullying me?* As the thought finally occurred to Kyousuke, his teacher's eyes lit up with a gleeful malice, as if to say, *I've been*

*waiting for you to figure it out*.

To Kurumiya, a sadist among sadists, Kyousuke, who was just an ordinary person, must have seemed like a chew toy. And because he was unreasonably sturdy, he wouldn't break from a little rough treatment. *Ah, could that be it? I'm just a source of amusement for her… could that be what's going on?* It was almost too absurd. *Is there no PTA at this school?*

"Hmph, fine, then. It sounds like it will be faster just to ask her. I'll interrogate her while I attend to her discipline. I'll ask her body, not her mind, using all my favorite torture methods… Heh-heh-heh!" Giggling, Kurumiya turned her eyes toward the unconscious Renko. She lowered her pair of deadly weapons and began to walk over, licking her lips.

Kyousuke rose in a panic, standing in Kurumiya's path.

"…Hey, you're in the way. Move. Do you want to be disciplined, too, Kamiya?"

Why did he do it, even in the face of Kurumiya's threats? Even Kyousuke himself did not know. His body had moved of its own accord. A little late, he understood. *Oh, is it true? I don't want to see her battered body.* The spectacle of a girl who had honestly expressed her feelings for him, being injured in front of his eyes—Kyousuke did not possess the patient disposition to silently allow that to continue.

Standing fast, Kyousuke stared into Kurumiya's eyes, which suddenly twinkled with cruelty. "…Move? No way. If you've got something to ask, then ask it! There's no need for violence, or 'discipline,' or torture."

"There is, though. Plenty of need… She told you, right, Kamiya? Murder Maid is a creature purposefully built to kill, a tool. No matter the reason, a tool that doesn't work when it's needed is worthless. It's necessary to quickly determine the cause of the

malfunction, and thoroughly retrain the tool. In her case it's more appropriate to say 'retune' or 'repair,' though… Anyway, don't worry, I won't destroy her. Murder Maid—Renko—is even sturdier than you. She can quite calmly endure a level of torture that would kill an ordinary person."

As she finished talking, Kurumiya thrust a long, dull, metal pipe toward Kyousuke's throat. Striking a pose with the deadly weapon, still bent at the end where it had smashed into Renko's head, Kurumiya laughed.

"…*She* can, but how about you, Kamiya? This is perfect. If you say you won't move aside, even after this warning, I'll put your endurance to the test. I'll push you until you die or until your mind craacks!"

"……"

Kyousuke still did not step aside, despite the finality of Kurumiya's threat. Though his bones might be cracked and shattered, his heart would never break. Once he had made a decision, he would follow it to the end. He would persevere. That was Kyousuke's nature. *How weak would I be if I gave in to my fear now?*

*If I wasn't so hardheaded, I probably wouldn't have ended up here in the first place, but—oh, well.* This way of life was all he knew. Kyousuke had decided to protect Renko, the girl who had told him she loved him. He hadn't been able to return her feelings, so he would endure physical pain in equal measure to her emotional anguish—that's what he decided. That was the best way he could respond to Renko's feelings, with gratitude.

"…Oh? You're quite the lady-killer, aren't you, Kamiya? That's just fine… If that's how you want to do it, I'll fully savor the experience. I'll show you the reason why Bellows

Maria is feared even by other professionals…hee-hee-hee!"

Shouldering the two iron pipes once more, Kurumiya took a step toward Kyousuke. The bloodthirst emanating from this top-tier killer was palpable. Kyousuke broke into an uneasy sweat. He clenched his fists hard, as if to control his body's shaking—

"Hyyyeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

A thunderous war cry roared across the rooftoop. Kurumiya's advance halted at the sound, her smiling face instantly steeped in exasperation.

"Y-you… How many times do you have to get in my way before you're satisfied…*Mohawk*?!" Her shoulders trembling slightly with rage, Kurumiya turned to the door with half-lidded eyes.

In the doorway stood the male student wrapped in bandages, looking triumphant. "Gya-ha-ha! You should know that already, widdle Kurumiyaaa! Until I make you surrender, of course. In other words, today! This very moment! Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Behind him, the loudly laughing Mohawk pulled a huge iron ball attached to a heavy chain. "One Ton" was neatly written on the surface.

"Don't call me little! It makes my hair stand on end. Anyway, that ball and chain…isn't that my private property? Meaning that you snuck into my staff room? I will *not* let you get away with that!"

"Heh-heh-heh-heh. Oh, but there's more! For instance, there's this!! Ta-daa!" Reaching into his breast pocket, Mohawk held aloft a pair of cute teddy-bear print underpants.

"……?!" The iron pipes slipped from Kurumiya's shoulders.

"……?!" Kyousuke, too, gaped at the sight.

It was hard to tell which was more shocking: the appearance of the teddy-bear underpants or the fact that Mohawk was waving them about, grinning like an idiot.

"Mohawk, you…" *Must be a hard-core idiot*, Kyousuke thought.

Mohawk wore a nihilistic smile. "Hah! Sorry, but little Kurumiya is my girl… If you lay a hand on her, I won't forgive you! I may not look it, but I'm an extreeemely jealous man, so watch out! Gya-ha-ha!"

"Uh…o-okay…well, I guess…you go for it? Ha…ha-ha-ha…" Returning a stiff smile, Kyousuke quietly moved away from Kurumiya.

An ominous, miasma-like presence swirled around Kurumiya, who stared silently, her shoulders trembling. The illusion of her flickering rage appeared to Kyousuke as dancing black flames. A low growl slipped from between her gritted teeth. "Since…when…did I… become…your…*girl*?"

Not paying her any attention, Mohawk had slipped the pair of underpants onto his head and was wearing them like an impromptu balaclava. He swung the iron chain menacingly and lifted the ball marked "One Ton" off the ground.

"…As I was saying, today is the day you're going to surrender, wee little Kurumiyaaa! I'll show you how serious I am! Try not to fall head over heels now!! Gyaaa-ha-ha-ha!"

No sooner had he shouted this than Mohawk took off. Swinging the iron ball overhead, he dashed headlong into a direct suicide attack.

Opposite him, Kurumiya was silent. She let both arms hang loosely and quietly closed

her eyes.

"Hyeeeeaaahhh!" With a loud war cry, Mohawk swung the iron ball straight at her face.

"Diiiiieeeeeeeeeeee!" Suddenly Kurumiya opened her eyes wide and struck the iron ball with the pipe in her right hand. With high-pitched metallic clank, the one-ton metal ball exploded into smithereens.

"…Hyeaa?" She bashed the befuddled Mohawk's face with the iron pipe in her left hand. "Gya-haaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—oof!!" Sent flying, Mohawk crashed headfirst into the iron fence and stopped moving. He landed next to Renko, who had still not woken up, and his eyes rolled back in his head as his body began to convulse.

His ruined, caved-in face couldn't have been shown on television. The teddy-bear print quickly became soaked with blood.

"Hmph. Finally some peace and quiet, how annoying…" Kurumiya sent a fragment of the iron ball flying with a kick. "But don't think I'm going to let you get away with just that little scolding! The iron ball is one thing, but ruining my lucky underpants…I'm gonna be up all night tormenting you." She approached Mohawk's crumpled figure, the two iron pipes gone, unnoticed, from her hands.

Just as no one ever saw where she pulled them out from, so, too, was it impossible to see where she had put them away. Lucky teddy-bear underpants notwithstanding, she was a truly frightening teacher.

"…Hey, Kamiya. For your correctional duty today, clean up that garbage over there. I'm going back to the staff room. After I reinstall Renko's safety device, I have to deal with this pig bastard."

She lifted Renko with her right hand and Mohawk with her left. On her way out, she picked up the gas mask that was lying on the ground and turned to face Kyousuke again.

"Renko Hikawa, who can't do anything but kill. Eiri Akabane, who can't *bring* herself to kill; Maina Igarashi, who kills by accident… Every last one of this lot that you're so friendly with has a bothersome defect—however, they're all child prodigies for whom we have great expectations, based on their abilities. I'm going to use you to help correct their faults. Hee-hee-hee! …Of course, you yourself will be fully reformed as well. I'm going to make you into a splendid *professional killer*. You, the ordinary Kyousuke Kamiya!" She laughed, eyes narrow and cruel.

Kyousuke stared back at Kurumiya with an indomitable glare. "Bullshit! I'm not going to become a killer or anything close to it!! I'll neither kill nor be killed… No matter what happens, no way. I'll resist… Don't think I'll be broken that easily!!"

Kurumiya's expression grew even more joyous under Kyousuke's angry gaze. "…Is that so? Well, it's good that you can be assertive. Please, by all means try to resist. If you're confident you can endure it, that is… Heh-heh-heh, very good! I'll tell you what… If, for three years, you can survive life at Purgatorium Remedial Academy…if you live to graduation without killing anyone and without being killed—I promise that then, and only then, *you will be allowed to return to your normal life*. Any false charges against you will be wiped clean."

"……?! Are you serious?!"

"Yes, very serious. I thought I told you that, Kamiya? I only speak the truth. Put it this way: No matter how strong a piece of metal might be, if you can't make it into what you

want, it's worthless. I'll review our conversation with the chairman of the school board. You just try and persevere…but three years is a long time, you know. I'll make sure to take my time and have plenty of fun with you! Heh-heh!"

"…I'm looking forward to it," Kyousuke replied, eyes fixed on Kurumiya's retreating back. "I'll endure it… I'll resist all the way to the end!" Gritting his teeth, he clenched his fists so tightly he could feel his bones grind.

His situation seemed so hopeless that he wanted to burst into laughter—and yet, at the end of it all, there was a faint ray of hope.

Kyousuke vowed in his heart never to give up.

"This time I'm going to get home really late, but…please wait for me, Ayaka."

Looking up at the sky, where the deep red twilight had begun to mix with the dark blue of dusk, Kyousuke thought to himself: *Somewhere, far away, Ayaka might be looking up at this very same sky…*

“Whaaaaaaaaaaattt?! Is it true you’ve really never killed a single person, Kyousuke?!” Maina’s hysterical voice echoed throughout the deserted infirmary. An entire day had passed.

“Hey…your voice is too loud! Drop the volume, Maina!”

“What are we gonna do if someone heard you?! Plus, coming out and repeating it is—Oww!!” Eiri, who added her complaint to Kyousuke’s, held her stomach and groaned. Propped up on the bed, she wore a stripe-patterned shirt. Her rust-red hair, usually in a ponytail, was loose, and it fell, long and wavy, about a face that, lacking its usual composure, was screwed up in pain.

“Eiri?! A-are you okaaayyy?!” Maina leaned forward in concern.

“Huh?! Oh yeah, I’m fine!” Eiri stiffened. “I’m fine, so…j-just calm down, okay?” Her body was covered in wounds. Band-Aids and gauze decorated her cheeks, and a thick

wrapping of bandages covered everything else.

The *perpetrator* who had inflicted these serious injuries, painful even to look at, hung her head and apologized. "Ohh…I'm sowwy! I was really frantic back then, thinking about what would happen if I didn't call for help quickly…oh no. And then, well…evewything just…ahm, well…"

"…It's fine. So don't worry about it so much. Aside from my ribs, which was Renko's doing, it's no big deal, see? Although those probably got worse from you falling on them over and over again. I mean, you did do that, but…a-anyway! I'm not upset, so it's fine. Only, just…until my injuries heal, don't come too close to me, okay?"

"…Yeah. I understand." Maina's shoulders drooped at the harsh truth of Eiri's words.

Eiri's reaction was completely understandable, however. On their way to the infirmary, Maina's incredible clumsiness had led to one disaster after another—and as a result Eiri had suffered through an utterly terrible experience, ending up with almost twice as many injuries as before.

Kyousuke, who had entrusted Eiri to Maina, also felt very guilty.

Reflecting on the situation, and looking at Maina and Kyousuke with their heads hung in shame, Eiri let out a sigh. "…Look, we don't need to worry about me. Let's talk about Kyousuke now."

"No, we do need to worry about you, but…well, you're right, anyway. Let's get back to what we were talking about." Smiling at Eiri's harsh but kind concern, Kyousuke cleared his throat, pulling himself together. "…As I was saying, the Warehouse Butcher thing is a false charge. I'm really just an ordinary person. I'm okay at fighting, but—"

"I'll call that bluff," Eiri interrupted. "You're not 'okay' at fighting."

"She's right, she's right! You're nothing like a regular ordinary person…you're an extremely strong ordinary person! You're a superhuman!"

Kyousuke clenched his fists and shook his head as the two of them protested his claim. Lurking in the back of his mind were the terms of graduation set forth by Kurumiya. "I'm really not that strong… I mean, I'm probably stronger than most people, but not strong enough to survive these next three years alone. I've already almost died way too many times! However…"

He stopped there for a moment and looked intently at Eiri's and Maina's faces. These were the only friends he had met in this Purgatorium Remedial Academy. They were the only people he could trust. "If the two of you work together with me, I think we can make it somehow. Of course, I'll also do everything I can to make sure that happens. So, I'm asking you… Please lend me your strength!" As he finished his request, Kyousuke bowed deeply to both of them. Up to this point, they'd helped each other out with this and that, but now he had made a formal request for aid. Kyousuke closed his mouth and stared at the floor.

Above his head, Eiri muttered in surprise. "You really are stupid, Kyousuke… What are you saying, after all we've been through? Something like that should be obvious."

"She's right, she's right!" Maina cheerfully agreed. "You're too preserved, Kyousuke! Especially in my case, I'm always depending on others… Please let me be helpful for once! I won't be very useful, though…" Though she should have said "reserved" instead of "preserved," it didn't really matter. Moved by their warmth, Kyousuke looked up, wiping the corners of his eyes.

"Wow…thank you. You're good people, both of you—ah, huh?"

In that moment, Kyousuke saw the momentary image of a black gas mask in the corner of his eye, peeking its face through a tiny crack where the door stood open, staring directly at him. But when Eiri and Maina looked over, following his line of sight, the gas mask slipped out of sight behind the door. The two girls tilted their heads in confusion.

With a strained smile, Kyousuke called out in a loud voice. "Heeey, Renko. What are you sneaking around for? Get in here."

However, Renko's form did not appear. She probably felt awkward, as one would expect after everything that had happened. Some moments passed, and then a frightened-sounding voice was audible from the direction of the door.

"Waah… B-but…you're definitely mad at me. And once you get mad, you're gonna lash out at me, and…"

"Hold on a second. Just what do you think of me? I'm not going to lash out at you, so get out here already."

"But you must be angry! And you probably hate me! I let you see my bare face and everything… There's no way you don't hate me…*sniffle*." From the sound of her voice, she was curled up on the floor.

As if she wasn't sure how to deal with the situation, Eiri clicked her tongue and glared in the direction of the door, placing a hand over her chest, which had been further diminished by the medical chest band wrapped around it.

Eiri had taken the most severe damage from Renko's attack. Aside from external wounds and some serious internal bleeding, one of her broken ribs had punctured a lung. The

complete recovery from her injuries was expected to take at least a month.

Earlier, when Eiri had discovered that Kyousuke, who should have been beaten even more to hell, had gotten away with only a few light wounds, she'd demanded, "…Are you actually even human?"

It wasn't hard to guess Eiri's feelings toward Renko right about then. As if her injuries weren't bad enough, an aura of sullenness emanated from her whole body.

"Shutupshutupshutupshutup! …You're so annoying. If you think you were wrong, then face up to me and apologize properly. You're pissing me off, acting like that."

Hearing Eiri's harsh words, the gas mask poked its head out halfway. "…I don't think I was wrong, and I'm not thinking of apologizing, either. I told you that was my real self. If were to apologize now, I'd be negating my own raison d'être… Plus, it's not like you would accept an apology, anyway. You hate me! I don't want to be hated by you guys… I understand why, but I don't want to see it with my own eyes. That's why—"

"That's why you were sneaking around hiding? I thought I told you before. I feel irritated by you acting like that. If you don't feel like apologizing, then don't. You can say that openly. You understand why you're hated? …Don't decide such a thing of your own accord."

Renko was at a loss, faced with Eiri's unconciliatory grumbling.

Then Maina, who had been hanging her head quietly, looked up. "I…I heard the whole story from Kyousuke! Renko with her mask removed is, well… He said she can't help killing. Somehow, I feel like that's similar to my clumsiness. Like it can't be helped, or there's no way around it… Renko accepted me even after she knew about my clumsiness, didn't she? So I won't start hating Renko because of something like this!"

At Maina's straightforward words, Renko appeared in the doorway again. "Maina…"

When Renko still did not come in, Kyousuke scratched the back of his head briskly and spoke up. "Anyway, you're wearing the mask now, so it's irrelevant, right? When you don't have it on, of course it'll be hard to get near you, but…that's for safety's sake, not because we hate you. Like a lion or something, yeah? No one hates the lion, but if you get close, you'll end up getting attacked…it's like that. We're not mad about what happened earlier anymore, so hurry up and get in here. Come on."

Seeing Kyousuke beckoning her, the halfway visible Renko fidgeted nervously. "Waah… b-but…"

"No buts about it. You said it yourself when we first learned about Maina's clumsiness, remember? As long as we understand that that's *how Maina is*, then we can support her and cope with her as we like…those were your words. Now I understand that that's *how you are*. And knowing that, I have this to say: Me, and Eiri, and Maina…we don't hate you! Yesterday we waited all day for you to show up, Renko!"

Renko froze. Silently, she looked at each one of them in turn. Eiri shrugged her shoulders, Maina cheerfully wore an embarrassed grin, and Kyousuke's smile was strained.

And then—

"Waaaaaaaahhh! You guuuuuuuuuyyysss!" Renko threw open the door and rushed into the room. "Thank you…thank you, everyone! Waah…*hic*...*kksshh*." She vigorously embraced each one of them in turn.

"Oww!! Idiot… If I say it hurts, it hurts!" After Eiri had pushed the teary-eyed Renko off of her, she guarded her chest with her arms. "…J-just die already…"

Maina said, "Eehh…Renko, d-don't cry…wah…*hic*," and started bawling in sympathy, squeezing Renko back.

Kyousuke was last, and as he patted Renko's back while she hugged him, he said, "…To think, the day before yesterday, she almost killed me," as if it had happened to someone else.

He felt neither wonder nor resentment. Well, he probably felt a little of each, but it went beyond those to things more like amazement and resignation… *I guess it can't be helped.*

No one could stay angry at such an innocently happy girl. Plus, the fact that a girl this sweet (and an incredible beauty without her mask) could have feelings for him gave him at least one reason not to hate the situation.

"…Kyousuke, just you wait," Renko whispered sweetly in his ear. "Soon, I'm going to make you like me, okay?"

At this sudden and straightforward declaration, Kyousuke's heart jumped in his chest. However, when he heard the words that came after it, his heart skipped a beat.

"*And when you do, I'll kill you! Kksshh.* Of course, as I am now, I don't feel like I want to kill, but…after all, I am the Murder Maid. I'll make you fall madly in love, and then I'll kill you. Relax, Kyousuke. I won't let you get killed by anyone else. I'll absolutely protect you. If you were to be killed by anyone else…the one who's going to kill you is me. I'm the one who's going to capture your heart."

"……"

His blushing face had blanched white in an instant, the pitter-patter in his chest

quickening to the pounding pulse of fear.

*So, ummm…what is she saying?* Renko said that she was going to protect Kyousuke, just so that she could kill him. *The instant that Kyousuke fell in love with Renko, Renko would kill Kyousuke*—in other words.

"I'll use any means necessary to get you to like me, Kyousuke! *Kksshh.*" Smiling ruefully, Renko squished her breasts together.

He had a hunch these would be a dangerous hazard. *She'll use any means necessary, geez…*

"I'll let you do this and that and the other thing, anything you want to do with me, Kyousuke. If you want, I'll even take off the mask! I can't kill you now, so it'd be fine. I'll take off my clothes and let you indulge yourself with me, exposed from head to toe!"

"What…did you say?"

*"Kksshh…"* Kyousuke gulped hard at the ominous sound.

If she let him do all that, he might not be able to help actually falling for her, even knowing that she was a creature designed and produced for murder. Of course, without her bloodlust, she had a wonderful personality…an excellent sense of style…an ultra top-rank beautiful face… For Kyousuke, dead in the thick of puberty, he didn't like it, but it was hard not to be attracted…

"…Okay, okay, stop it. You're getting too carried away. Get away from Kyousuke." Eiri forcibly inserted her elbow between them and wedged the two of them apart.

Renko gave a complaining groan, then turned on Eiri. "What the hell, Eiri? Are you targeting Kyousuke, too? If you are, then we're rivals!"

"…Huh? Not really. I don't have any interest in Kyousuke. Not at all. Seriously, none."

"Oh, is that so! Well, then, could you not be too much of an obstacle? I mean, if we did get into a contest, the results would be obvious, but. Our styles are too different. *Kksshh.*"

"What?! What is that, are you trying to start a fight?! All I was saying was that it's incredibly irritating for you to be making out right in front of me, and I don't especially want to see it, so— Oww!!"

"Heyheyhey…y-you two! Please calm down! C-cawm…pwease cawm…oh no. I'b sure dat Kyousuke is gweat, but…" Looking back and forth between Renko and Eiri, between whom violent sparks were flying yet again, Maina grew more and more flustered.

At first, Kyousuke just stared at them, gaping, but gradually a smile spread itself across his face. Kurumiya had said it. Three years is a long time.

Purgatorium Remedial Academy—a strange school only murderers attended. If Kyousuke were alone, he wouldn't be confident that he could endure even one year out of the three. Everyone around him was crazy, so his mind would probably snap before his body broke. But now…

*If I'm passing the three years with these girls, they'll probably fly by faster than I expected.*

That's what Kyousuke thought.

The middle of the night, two AM—the lights were out, the room was dark.

The girl looked up at the night sky, perched on the edge of a bed that was missing its occupant. Soft silver light streamed through the clean windowpane, where the curtain had been left open.

"…Big brother." Her frail voice slipped out through bone-dry lips. Tear streaks ran every direction across her pallid, hollow cheeks. Reflecting the gray sky, her eyes were apathetic and inhuman. It was as if the tears had carried all emotion out of her with them.

"…I miss you," she mumbled in an exhausted voice. And then her eyes lit up once more, and the tears overflowed. Her sorrow ran deep at having a beloved family member suddenly snatched away, and she felt as if her tears would never dry for all eternity.

"Noooooooooooo…" Moaning, she buried her face in the towel and inhaled deeply.

Her brother's scent still lingered there faintly, so she pressed the soft cloth into her nose

and sniffed it greedily. She sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed and she sniffed.

She filled her lungs with the lingering scent of her beloved older brother, trying to fill her heart as well. But it wasn't enough. It was completely insufficient. There's no way it could have been enough.

She wanted everything. Her brother's scent, and his warmth, and his words, and his smiling face, and his kindness, all of it.

This remnant couldn't come close to satisfying her. As long as she didn't have her big brother by her side, every second of every minute was truly intolerable. The instant the last traces of him faded from this room and from the house, just as his scent faded from the towel, she was sure she would die of sorrow. Like a fish without water, or a human without oxygen, or a junkie without drugs, her life would surely fall apart.

—That's why…

"…I can't just wait for you!"

She removed her face from the towel and again looked up at the sky. The moon, a cleanly sliced crescent, looked down on her—on Ayaka coldly. A faint smile began to creep across her face, illuminated by the pale light.

Staring entranced at the night sky, she spoke to herself in a gentle tone.

“Hey, big brother… I wonder if you’re looking up at this same sky wherever you are? I don’t even know where that is… But wait for me? I’m coming soon. *I’m going to follow you* — No matter what it takes, I absolutely will.”

A light came into Ayaka’s wide eyes that had not been there before. Dwelling behind her dark orbs was an incredible determination. This *dreadful determination* that Ayaka harbored in her chest was something her big brother Kyousuke knew nothing about.

Not yet, anyway…

*Psycome 1: Murderer in the Flower of Death / The End*

# AFTERWORD

## Master of Ceremonies

Thank you very much for picking up this book among the many others available to you.

Nice to meet you, my name is Mizuki Mizushiro. Please accept this, my debut work, which won the Award of Excellence in the fourteenth Enterbrain Entertainment Awards, in lieu of a business card.

It's an airheaded book written on the premise, "what if someone's classmates were all murderers?" but the genre of the story is love comedy. For that reason, I tried to keep the stench of blood to a reasonable level, so that the sweet scent of girls could waft over it. At least, for now… Heh-heh.

The setting is crazy to begin with, so I'm planning to do lots of things that can't be done in a normal school love comedy. There will be prison school campouts, fatal final exams, and calamitous culture festivals, among other events.

…Well, then. From this point, I have a torrent of thanks to offer. To the person in charge, Ms. Gibu; the illustrator Namanie; the designers at musikagographics; the PR team; the selection committee members; my friends; my family; all of my relatives; my former partners; and everybody who had anything to do with the publication of this book—thank you all very much.

I had to lump everyone together for the sake of brevity, but I would like to express my feelings of gratitude directly to each and every one of you at a later date. And more than anyone else—

To you, who have chosen this book. Truly, I thank you!

*Mizuki Mizushiro*

*~Written while listening to Slipknot~*

I AM NAMANIE, WHO DREW THE PICTURES.
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Copyright

# Copyright

PSYCOME, Vol. 1: Murderer in the Flower of Death
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